



USS Constitution
Museum

A Pennies Campaign to Save “Old Ironsides”

Carl Herzog and Kate Monea, 2025

A publication of the USS Constitution Museum, Boston.

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A Ship in Disrepair

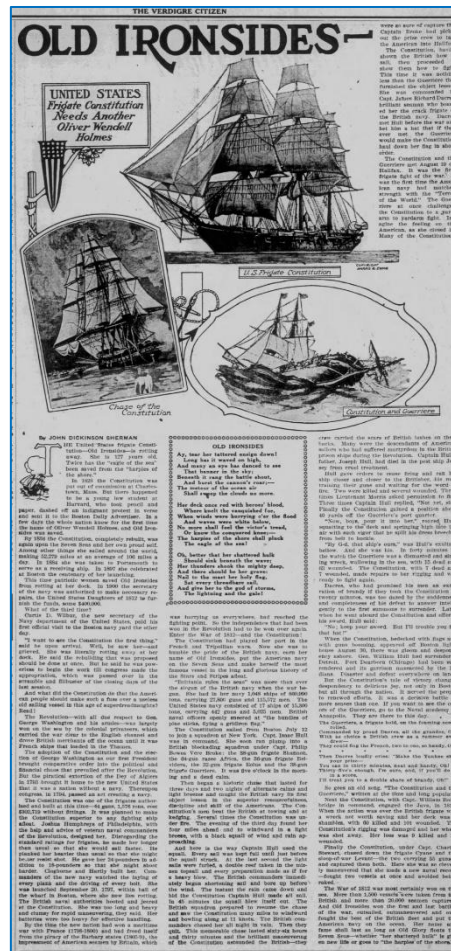
In February 1924, the Naval Board of Inspection and Survey assessed *Constitution* where it was docked at the Boston Navy Yard and found extensive rot. The ship was leaking badly and in dire condition.

Since its return to Boston in 1897 to commemorate the centennial of its launch, the ship had remained largely neglected. No initial funds accompanied the move, and funds for maintenance were inconsistent. A wooden barn remained over the ship's upper deck, a relic of its time as a receiving barracks at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. In 1915, public concern sparked a petition that led Congress to authorize a restoration. The barn was removed and the rig rebuilt, but without regular funding the ship again fell into disrepair. A \$400,000 restoration bill introduced by Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge failed to gain support in Congress. By 1924, the situation was critical.

The Board of Inspection and Survey recommended the ship be “rebuilt, refitted, put into condition for preservation, and preserved for the greatest length of time practicable as a sea-worthy vessel.”¹ It proposed a Congressional appropriation of \$400,000 for the work, though the Boston Navy Yard estimated a cost of \$75,725 and 180 working days.²

By September, a newspaper report under the headline “‘Old Ironsides’ is Doomed” was circulating in more than 80 newspapers from Bangor, Maine, to Hilo, Hawai’i, with strong coverage in the Midwest. In Oklahoma alone, at least 16 papers ran the story.³

The report quoted F. L. Drew, a civilian mechanical engineer working in the Navy Yard, who doubted the ship could be saved: “‘The leaks in this ancient battleship allows two feet of water to enter the hull each week,’ said



John Dickinson Sherman's syndicated story as it appeared in the Verdigre (NE) Citizen.

¹ Philip Andrews and A. C. Ratschesky, “Report of the National Save Old Ironsides Committee, March 10, 1925 - March 1, 1930,” March 25, 1930, 1, National Archives, Waltham, Massachusetts.

² Andrews and Ratschesky, 1.

³ Aggregate newspaper data compiled from searches using newspapers.com. The story appears to have originated with the *Boston Herald* in early July. It worked its way across the country until October 4 when it appeared in the *Hilo Tribune-Herald* in Hawai’i.

Mr. Drew to the Herald last night. ‘The hull is so rotten today that it is doubtful if Congress can act quickly enough to preserve the boat.’”⁴

Under another headline, “United States Frigate Constitution Needs Another Oliver Wendell Holmes,” writer John Dickinson Sherman provided a detailed history of the ship alongside news of its condition. This piece, accompanied by artwork of the ship’s historic events, was carried in dozens of small-town papers throughout the Midwest.⁵ These stories drew attention to *Constitution*’s plight in communities throughout the nation.

Curtis Wilbur Arrives

On March 19, 1924, Curtis Wilbur was sworn in as Secretary of the Navy. A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and former Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court, Wilbur had a reputation as a squeaky-clean moralist with a commitment to greater duty. He accepted the

position within 10 minutes of receiving the telegraphed offer.

In July, Wilbur visited the Boston Navy Yard and *Constitution* for the first time and quickly endorsed the ship’s preservation. He was urged on by the National and Massachusetts State Societies of the Daughters of the War of 1812, who were already lobbying Congress to appropriate funding. However, Wilbur feared the ship might not last long enough to wait for another appropriation cycle. A faster solution was needed, and while the idea of fundraising was proposed, federal law lacked a mechanism for accepting private contributions to government projects.⁶



“Secretary of Navy Curtis D. Wilbur, on his first visit to Charlestown (Mass.) navy yard, inspected the revolutionary frigate Constitution. The old ship, in danger of sinking at its wharf, must be saved at all costs, the secretary declared.”
Miami (FL) Union, July 29, 1924.

⁴“OLD IRONSIDES IS DOOMED,” *Springfield (MA) Daily News*, July 5, 1924.

⁵ John Dickinson Sherman, “OLD IRONSIDES – United States Frigate Constitution Needs Another Oliver Wendell Holmes,” *Verdigre (NE) Citizen*, September 25, 1925.

⁶ “OLD IRONSIDES MUST BE SAVED,” *Corvallis (WA) Gazette-Times*, July 30, 1924.

Wilbur's Plan

While news of *Constitution's* dire condition continued to spread throughout the summer, Wilbur was refining a detailed plan to save the ship.

Instead of simply launching a public subscription drive, Wilbur devised a strategy to mobilize patriotic organizations to gather small donations from schoolchildren. This approach, he argued, would connect the nation's youth to the Navy's heritage and the country's broader history while also raising funds for the restoration.

Wilbur tasked Admiral Louis de Steiguer, Commander of the First Naval District, with organizing the effort. De Steiguer, a veteran of the Spanish-American War and World War I, was an unlikely choice. In his 40 years of service, de Steiguer was known for his combative personality. As a fleet admiral, his captains found him unapproachable and difficult to work with. Though married, he had no children.⁷

In November 1924, de Steiguer began presenting Wilbur's plan to a range of civic organizations, including the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Daughters of the War of 1812, and the Colonial Dames.⁸ These groups eagerly volunteered their support.

Public reaction, however, was mixed. Some supported Wilbur's vision, while others criticized Congress for not simply funding the restoration. The *Linn County Budget-Gazette* of Brookfield, Missouri, wrote, "The government can afford to maintain scores of useless projects which, in the aggregate, reach a staggering total, but it can not afford to spend what, in comparison, is a mere pittance to maintain one of our proudest historical possessions. Instead it must extend its little tin cup, like a blind beggar, and beseech the children for pennies."⁹



Rear Admiral Louis R. de Steiguer, USN.
Courtesy Naval History and Heritage Command.

⁷ Betty C. Taussig, *A Warrior for Freedom: Admiral Robert B. Carney*, First Edition (Manhattan, Kansas: Sunflower Univ Pr, 1995), 42–43.

⁸ Andrews and Ratschesky, 1.

⁹ "Old Ironsides," *Linn County (MO) Budget-Gazette*, December 11, 1924.

The *New York Herald-Tribune* echoed this sentiment, writing, “The teachers can explain to their pupils how badly the *Constitution* needs their pennies, seeing that the older generation has allowed it to decay. It is a patriotic appeal, but a rather ignominious performance for Uncle Sam to levy on the youngsters to keep up ‘Old Ironsides’...It would comport better with national pride if Congress were to make adequate provision for the storied ship which has been so shabbily treated.”¹⁰

With civic societies willing to coordinate outreach to schools, and de Steiguer leading the Navy’s campaign, all that remained was Wilbur’s appeal to Congress for authority.

Although no money was appropriated, Congress still needed to authorize the restoration and specifically allow the Navy to accept private donations to fund the work. An authorizing resolution sponsored by Senator Lodge was introduced into an omnibus bill passed on March 4, 1925:

“That the Secretary of the Navy is hereby authorized to repair, equip, and restore the Frigate *CONSTITUTION* as far as may be practicable, to her original condition, but not for active service; Provided, That the Secretary of the Navy is further authorized to accept and use any donations or contributions which may be offered for the aforesaid purpose.”¹¹

Two days later, Wilbur instructed de Steiguer to lead the entire fundraising campaign. He outlined his ideas for its execution but emphasized the importance of the campaign’s theme and messaging:

“It is important that we should make clear we are not trying to help out the Government in an economy program. The real matter involved is the interest of the people of the United States in an historical reminder of the progress of the nation and if the people are willing to support such a proposition they ought not be compelled to do so by appropriation of Congress which in effect takes the money out of their pockets without their consent.”¹²

With an estimated 16 million students across the United States, from elementary schools to universities, Wilbur figured a contribution of just two and a half cents per student could raise \$400,000.

¹⁰ “An Ignominious Performance,” *New York Herald-Tribune* as reprinted in *Buffalo (NY) Post*, March 16, 1925.

¹¹ Andrews and Ratshesky, 2. Lodge died in November 1924, and his resolution was subsequently sponsored by Maine Senator Frederick Hale.

¹² Curtis D. Wilbur, Secretary of the Navy, to Rear Admiral L.R. de Steiguer, March 6, 1925, as reprinted in the addendum of Philip Andrews and A. C. Ratshesky, “Report of the National Save Old Ironsides Committee, March 10, 1925 - March 1, 1930,” March 25, 1930, National Archives, Waltham, Massachusetts.

The Save “Old Ironsides” Committee

De Steiguer turned to the Daughters of the War of 1812 for help organizing and launching the campaign. The Daughters suggested de Steiguer bring in Abraham Captain Ratschesky, President of the United States Trust Company in Boston. Ratschesky’s involvement was pivotal in accelerating the project forward.

A. C. Ratschesky, a Boston-born businessman and philanthropist, brought crucial fundraising and organizational expertise, as well as an extensive network of influential connections. He quickly recommended forming both state and national Save “Old Ironsides” Committees, with Massachusetts serving as a test case for the broader effort.

Within a month, both state and national committees were established. Ratschesky served as treasurer of both, while de Steiguer chaired the National Committee and coordinated support among other Naval District commanders across the country.

Massachusetts Governor Alvan T. Fuller, a latecomer to politics but a successful automobile dealer and philanthropist, was named chair of the Massachusetts State Committee. Fuller was tasked with encouraging other governors to create similar committees in their states.

The Advisory Finance Committee included prominent business figures, while the Executive Committee brought together Navy personnel and leaders of supporting civic organizations. The committee’s July letterhead listed the following members:¹³

Advisory Finance Committee

Allan Forbes, President, State Street Trust Co.
Charles E. Cotting, Lee, Higginson & Co.
Frank W. Remick, Kidder, Peabody & Co.
John T. Macomber, President, Harris, Forbes & Co.
James J. Phelan, Hornblower & Weeks
Rear Admiral Louis R. de Steiguer, U.S. Navy
A. C. Ratschesky, President, United States Trust Co.

National Executive Committee

Rear Admiral L. R. de Steiguer, Chairman
Curtis D. Wilbur, Secretary of the Navy
T. Douglas Robinson, Assistant Secretary of the Navy
A. C. Ratschesky, President, United States Trust Co., Boston, Mass., Treasurer
Mrs. Samuel Preston Davis, President, National Society United States Daughters of 1812
Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt, former Assistant Secretary of the Navy
John G. Price, Past Exalted Ruler, B.P.O.E.
James R. Nicholson, Past Exalted Ruler, B.P.O.E.
Lieut. Comdr. E. S. R. Brandt, U.S. Navy, Secretary

¹³ Andrews and Ratschesky, 7–8. Despite Brandt’s listing as secretary on the executive committee, it appears Towner continued largely in that role.

By mid-May, 12 governors had agreed to chair state committees, with plans to launch the campaign in June 1925. However, it quickly became clear that the project's complexity would make a June launch unfeasible, and the National Committee postponed the start until the fall.¹⁴

Enter the Elks

The Save "Old Ironsides" Committee faced a major challenge: the Daughters of the War of 1812 and other organizations involved in the project lacked the membership and national reach necessary to manage state-level campaigns effectively. The campaign required an organization with a nationwide network and strong local connections from coast to coast. They turned to the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, whose members had visited *Constitution* by the thousands during their annual convention in Boston in July 1924.¹⁵

The Elks began in New York in the 1860s as a social drinking club for theatrical performers. The group adopted charitable goals after successfully raising funds for a family left destitute after a member's death. By the late 1800s, the Elks had expanded nationally through local lodges, and continued to grow after World War I.

As a blend of social club, business network, and charitable organization, the Elks attracted middle-class members, promoted patriotic themes, and leveraged its national structure to support local lodges. By 1925, the group boasted roughly 1,400 lodges and nearly 900,000 members.¹⁶ Lodges located in small towns built meeting halls that could be rented for community use. Lodges in larger cities constructed large hotels for visiting members and public events. As a result, the Elks had a visible presence in towns and cities across the nation.¹⁷

At their national convention in Portland, Oregon, in June, the Elks agreed to take on management of *Constitution*'s fundraising campaign. James R. Nicholson, a former Grand Exalted Leader from Springfield, Massachusetts, became campaign manager, and headquarters were established at the Boston Navy Yard.

¹⁴ Andrews and Ratshesky, 5.

¹⁵ "Welcome extended Elks at start of Convention," *The Boston Globe*, July 8, 1924.

¹⁶ "Directory of Subordinate Lodges," *The Elks Magazine*, July 1924, 40.

¹⁷ Despite the Elks' presence in most American towns, Elks membership did not begin to transcend racial, religious, or gender barriers until the late 1900s. The rejection of African Americans by many local lodges early on led to the independent formation of a nearly identical separate organization for Black members in 1897, the "Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks." Although the original Elks formally desegregated in 1972, the IBPOE still exists today. BPOE members are also still required to affirm a belief in God, and Jewish membership was often opposed by some local lodges. Membership was also officially restricted to men until 1995, when a Utah court case threatened local lodges' liquor licenses if they discriminated against women. Wives of members had participated in most of the group's activities for much its history but were not officially members or able to hold office in the organization until 1995.

Expenses, Awards, and Outreach

The National Save “Old Ironsides” Committee sought to avoid incurring any campaign-related expenses that could not be covered, so their first fundraising effort in the late summer of 1925 focused on individual donations earmarked for an expense fund. Meanwhile, the Elks also raised money to support campaign costs. Between July and September 1925, the Committee raised nearly \$27,000. Of this, about \$5,000 came from Navy personnel solicited by de Steiguer, while Ratshesky gathered \$22,000 from private donors.¹⁸

In addition to operating costs, funds were allocated for the purchase of plaques, medals, and other awards to honor campaign contributors. The Elks funded a series of plaques to recognize organizations donating \$50 or more in each lodge’s district. The 1,797 bronze-and-wood plaques were “offered to banks, libraries, department stores, and other institutions that subscribe \$50 or more.”¹⁹ The Elks were restricted from awarding plaques to individual donors, a reflection of Wilbur’s steadfast desire to avoid relying on large donations from individuals.

The Elks leveraged other activities in support of the campaign. On “Elks Day” at a Boston Braves baseball game, the opening ceremony featured a Navy contingent, a Marine Corps band, and a pennant that read, “An Elk in every School Room will save Old Ironsides.” Tom Brady, chair of the local Elks “Old Ironsides” Committee, distributed cigars to all the players and special cuff links to players who were Elks members.²⁰

The National Save “Old Ironsides” Committee also leveraged the emerging power of radio. On October 17, Wilbur broadcasted campaign updates via WEAJ in New York, reaching stations across the country through the National Broadcaster’s Association. The program featured a concert by the Marine Corps band in Washington, D.C. and a reading of Oliver Wendell Holmes’s famous 1830 poem, “Old Ironsides.”²¹



“Left — Manager Arthur Fletcher of the Phillies. Middle — Tom Brady of the Elks “Old Ironsides” committee who presented cuff links and cigars to players at Braves Field yesterday. Right — Manager Dave Bancroft of the Braves.”
The Boston Globe, September 12, 1925.

¹⁸ Andrews and Ratschesky, 10.

¹⁹ “This is ‘Old Ironsides’ Month,” *The Elks Magazine*, October, 1925, 33.

²⁰ “BRAVES AND PHILS SPLIT ON ELKS DAY,” *The Boston Globe*, September 12, 1925.

²¹ “CHILDREN TO HELP SAVE FAMOUS CRAFT,” *Muskogee (OK) Daily News*, October 12, 1925.

Appealing to Schools

The pennies campaign was announced in the August 1925 issue of *The Elks Magazine*, and October 19th to 24th was designated “Old Ironsides Week” to coincide with the anniversary of the ship’s launch.²² However, the Elks quickly recognized that getting school districts to participate in the fundraising campaign posed a significant obstacle. In an attempt to overcome this, they focused on ancillary activities that added educational value and gave legitimacy to the drive. “Old Ironsides Week” became a key rallying point, offering an opportunity for *Constitution*-focused history activities, which could then be shared in local schools. The Elks developed a curriculum for distribution at local lodges, which was used to engage with schools and solicit donations.

At the same time, the Save “Old Ironsides” Committee began distributing buttons to children who donated their pennies. Although Wilbur initially thought the requested two and a half cents per student was too small to warrant a premium, a 1930 campaign report explained the rationale behind the buttons: “This feature of button distribution was introduced to avoid opposition voiced by school authorities against direct collections from the schoolchildren. This method entailed the actual sale of some souvenir or trinket that tend to promote the patriotic and education features of the campaign”²³



*Obverse and reverse of a Save “Old Ironsides” Campaign button.
USS Constitution Museum Collection. Mrs. Merton W. Lansky Gift. 252.1*

Elks lodges surveyed their local schools to gather student population data. This allowed the national lodge to produce and distribute the appropriate number of buttons, curricula, and

²² “Help Save ‘Old Ironsides’ The Navy Appeals to the Elks and Their Spirit of Patriotism,” *The Elks Magazine*, August 1925, 46.

²³ Andrews and Ratshesky, 6.

materials. They set a quota of 40 percent of student enrollment in each lodge's district and ordered enough buttons to meet that number.²⁴

Essay Contests

In the spirit of educational value, the campaign introduced a series of essay contests in over 800 colleges, high schools, and elementary schools across the country, with state and national winners in each group. President Calvin Coolidge approved the contest prompts, and an Elks member donated \$2,500 to fund gold, silver, and bronze medals for the winners.

The three essay prompts were:

- For college students: "The contribution of the USS *Constitution* to human liberty and to national progress."
- For high school students: "Why did the victories of the USS *Constitution* contribute so largely to our success in the War of 1812?"
- For elementary students: "Why will the preservation of the USS *Constitution* promote patriotism?"

The contests not only enhanced the campaign's educational impact but also provided an avenue for student participation in districts where the Elks were not permitted to make presentations or collect donations. The essay contest won broad approval from teachers who encouraged their students to participate.

Some local newspapers reprinted the students' essays, offering insight into what children thought about *Constitution* and the lessons they absorbed from the campaign and its media coverage.

Julia Kochevar, a 13-year-old eighth grader from Grand Junction, Colorado, and daughter of Slovenian immigrants, wrote an eloquent and impassioned essay that won her a bronze medal in the statewide contest. Several months later she was announced as the national winner.

"To her mast we shall tack the patriotism of our young Americans, around her let us gather the aspirations and ambitions of our youth," she wrote in her 567-word essay. "With her as a guide they will sail triumphantly on, fearlessly buffeting the billows that arise up to engulf them."



Julia Kochevar's portrait in the September 1926 issue of The Elks Magazine.

²⁴ "Help Save 'Old Ironsides' The Navy Appeals to the Elks and Their Spirit of Patriotism," *The Elks Magazine*, August 1925, 46.

Kochevar received a second medal and was invited to the Elks' national conference in Chicago to read her essay, which was also published in the organization's national magazine. It was a proud accomplishment. In her senior high school yearbook, four years later, her class photo was accompanied by the caption, "Her favorite ship is Old Ironsides."



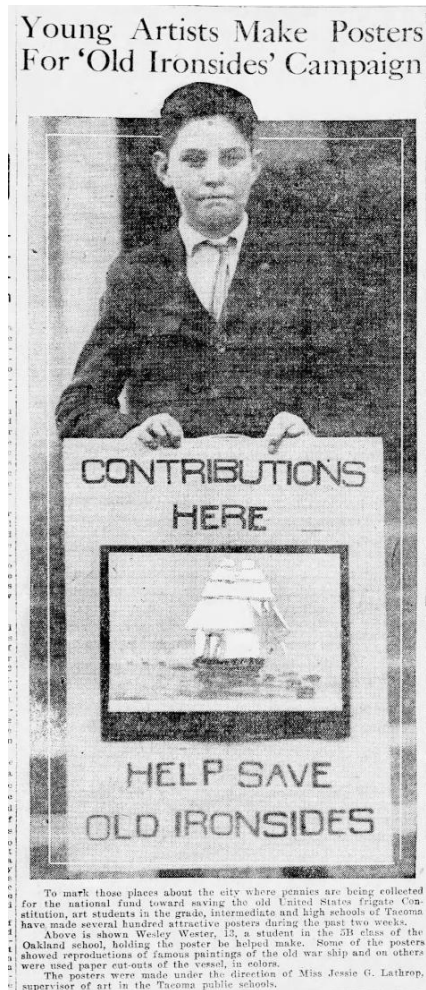
*Julia Kochevar's 1925 essay contest medal.
Julia's typed essay is in the collection of the USS Constitution Museum.
USS Constitution Museum Collection. Julia K. Jackson Gift. 311.2*

Pennies Roll In

Participation during "Old Ironsides Week" varied widely from school district to school district, even among neighboring communities near *Constitution's* home port of Boston.

In nearby Somerville, Massachusetts, 2,000 schoolchildren toured the ship early in the week. Meanwhile, in the Boston suburb of Newton, the school committee declined to admit Elk members into their schools. *The Boston Globe* reported, "In another city permission was refused on the grounds that while the cause of the Constitution was a worthy one, it would be the first step towards opening the school doors to all kinds of propaganda. The Newton School

Committee holds the same view.”²⁵ Despite this, the Newton Elks Lodge still held an essay contest for students and sold buttons for 10 cents each.²⁶



“Above is shown Wesley Wester, 13, a student in the 5B class of the Oakland school, holding the poster he helped make.” Tacoma (WA) Daily Ledger, October 18, 1925.

businesses, allowing donations to be credited to specific schools.³²

Further south in Plymouth, the Elks organized a meeting with district educators to share their plans and garner support. They bolstered meeting attendance by including speeches from Massachusetts Superior Court Judge Hugo Dubuque, a constitutional law expert, and Plymouth-based Judge John P. Vahey, who served as defense attorney for Bartolomeo Vanzetti during the widely publicized 1921 trial of Sacco and Vanzetti.²⁷

In Arlington, the Elks went beyond school visits and enlisted children for neighborhood fundraising. *The Boston Globe* reported: “Circulars have been sent out stating the object and inviting every one to take part. Tomorrow afternoon the children more than 12 years old will start from the Elks Home at the corner of Massachusetts and Bartlett avs and canvass the town. Arlington Lodge will provide automobiles.”²⁸

North of Boston in Wakefield, schoolchildren raised \$300.²⁹ Medford raised more than twice their quota with over \$800 donated.³⁰ Melrose agreed to participate but was delayed two weeks due to a late shipment of buttons and materials.³¹

Campaign results in communities large and small around the country also made the news. In Miles City, Montana, Elk member and court clerk Raymond Grant organized a local drive that included \$6.80 from a rural school—the highest amount collected by any school in that region.

In Tacoma, Washington, students across the district created posters promoting the campaign for their schools. Volunteers placed these posters and collection cans in participating

²⁵ “SAVE ‘OLD IRONSIDES’ WEEK OPENS WITH VISIT OF CHILDREN TO THE FAMOUS SHIP,” *The Boston Globe*, October 20, 1925. “Newton,” *The Boston Globe*, October 14, 1925.

²⁶ “Newton,” *The Boston Globe*, October 20, 1925.

²⁷ “ELK PLANS IN PLYMOUTH TO SAVE OLD IRONSIDES,” *The Boston Globe*, October 13, 1925.

²⁸ “Arlington,” *The Boston Globe*, October 22, 1925.

²⁹ “Wakefield,” *The Boston Globe*, November 12, 1925.

³⁰ “‘Old Ironsides’ Prized to Pupils,” *The Boston Globe*, October 24, 1925.

³¹ “Melrose,” *The Boston Globe*, October 20, 1925.

³² “GOOD CAUSE TO CLAIM PENNIES,” *Tacoma (WA) Daily Ledger*, October 18, 1925.

In Dallastown, Pennsylvania, students raised \$35 and sent their donations to the Elks Lodge in York.³³ In Portland, Maine, where the Elks were not permitted to campaign within the schools, volunteers placed collection boxes in storefronts.³⁴

Throughout the fall of 1925 and into the winter of 1926, donation reports came in from across the country. The Elks' communication strategy involved issuing press releases highlighting these reports, followed by news of donations from individual schools. The goal was to inspire other schools and organizations to get involved or keep fundraising.

Outside of schools, civic groups also joined the cause. In Boston, Navy Yard workers turned their annual summer picnic into "Constitution Field Day" and organized athletic competitions to raise money for the project. Organizers expected over 5,000 attendees at the August 15 event at Lake Pearl in Wrentham. The Governor, de Steiguer, and the Mayor—all campaign committee members—donated trophies for the contests.³⁵

Despite these efforts, the Elks recognized they were falling short of their \$400,000 goal and sought an extension to the campaign. The December issue of *The Elks Magazine*, reported:

"We have found many difficulties, due principally to the rules and regulations of municipal authorities, which prohibit a general campaign for funds among schoolchildren. It wasn't anticipated that we would run up against a snag in a campaign of that kind, and I think our troubles have grown very largely out of the fact that the time limit was too short to get that objection out of the way. It is quite likely, therefore, that in the first reports that come from the 'Old Ironsides' committee it will be an apparent failure, and that we will not be able to get the funds that we expected, but you can say this, that there will be no failure on the part of the Elks to do anything that they undertake to do, particularly on behalf of our government."³⁶

³³ "DALLASTOWN." *York (PA) Dispatch*, October 24, 1925.

³⁴ "Collection Boxes in Stores For Old Ironsides Donations," *Portland (ME) Evening Express*, October 22, 1925

³⁵ "FINE TROPHIES FOR WINNERS AT CONSTITUTION FIELD DAY," *The Boston Globe*, August 14, 1925.

³⁶ "The Save 'Old Ironsides' Campaign," *The Elks Magazine*, December 1925, 36.

FOR "OLD IRONSIDES FIELD DAY" OF NAVY YARD WORKERS



COMMITTEE ON NAVY YARD EMPLOYEES' OUTING

Front Row, Left to Right—L. E. Zerbell, E. J. Carey, D. J. Carroll, Clarence C. Nispel, chairman; Fred Baesner, E. M. Fisher, John J. Cullen, Alfred L. Hommel. Back Row—B. G. Barnes, John D. Chisholm, R. J. Dobbyn, B. F. Thompson, Joseph R. Dean, James A. Zolla, John J. Weidon, Frank Drew, John F. Cantwell.

Lake Pearl Grove, Wrentham, will be the scene of the Navy Yard employees' picnic Saturday afternoon, Aug. 15. It is to be called "Old Ironsides Field Day," as the proceeds will be given to "Save Old Ironsides." It is expected that 5000 employees will attend the outing and Rear Admiral Le R. de Steiguer and the officers at the Navy Yard or on ships at this port have been invited to attend. Gov. Fuller, Lieut. Gov. Allen, Mayor Curley and many other officials have been sent invitations also. There will be sports for both the men and women and a baseball game has been arranged between the teams of the U. S. S. Florida and the Naval Hospital. Music will be furnished by two bands, one from the Navy Yard and the other from the U. S. S. Shawmut. Arrangements have been made for a special train to leave the South Station at 12:15 p. m. The committee in charge of arrangements includes Clarence Nispel, chairman; B. G. Barnes, John D. Chisholm, R. J. Dobbyn, B. F. Thompson, Joseph Dean, James Zolla, John Weidon, Frank Drew, John Cantwell, E. J. Carey, D. J. Carroll, E. M. Fisher, Fred Baesner, E. J. Zerbell, Alfred L. Hommel.

"Committee on Navy Yard Employees' Outing."
The Boston Globe, August 8, 1925.

Post-Campaign Pivot

On October 24, 1925, the final day of “Old Ironsides Week,” de Steiguer ended his duty as Commander of the First Naval District and Chair of the National Save “Old Ironsides” Committee. Rear Admiral Philip Andrews, also a veteran of the Spanish-American War and World War I, succeeded him in both roles.



*Rear Admiral Philip Andrews, USN.
Courtesy Naval History and Heritage Command.*

Andrews quickly realized the Elks alone could not meet the fundraising goal. He initiated a strategy to increase direct school-level outreach with help from National Committee members while simultaneously pursuing new revenue sources.

Media mogul William Randolph Hearst, intrigued by the campaign, offered to publicize the fundraiser in his newspapers to persuade more urban school districts to join in the cause. Under Hearst’s general manager, Charles Grant Miller, the committee sought access to schools in New York City, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore.³⁷

Despite these added efforts, it became clear by early 1926 that contributions from schoolchildren alone would not cover the full cost of *Constitution*’s restoration. Donations slowed, and the Elks’ campaign began to lose steam. When tallied, the pennies campaign

raised about \$154,000 from schoolchildren across the nation.

Andrews reported the shortfall to Navy Secretary Curtis Wilbur, who finally approved additional fundraising efforts—so long as they avoided large private donations. Instead, he agreed to the sale of souvenirs and commemorative art at modest prices, inviting the broader public to join their children in saving the historic ship.

In their 1930 campaign report, Andrews and Ratshesky noted, “Mr. Wilbur has never waived from the principle which he laid down in the beginning, that the CONSTITUTION should be

³⁷ Andrews and Ratshesky, 11.

rebuilt by popular subscription, and by donations obtained in small sums from the largest possible number of people. Because of this policy, all the money needed has not been obtained.”³⁸

Artwork and Souvenirs

To help generate additional funds, Gordon Hope Grant, an American marine artist and well-known illustrator for the Boy Scouts, was commissioned to paint a depiction of “Old Ironsides” in its glory. The intent was to remind Americans of the ship’s heroic past and its status as a national icon.

Grant produced an oil painting of the ship cruising through choppy seas under full sail. The painting, completed on November 20, 1926, was unveiled by Wilbur during intermission at the premiere of Paramount Pictures’ silent feature film *Old Ironsides* at the Rivoli Theater in New York. The film, directed by James Cruze, depicted *Constitution*’s exploits under Commodore Edward Preble during the Barbary Wars, and helped raise awareness of the ship and the campaign. After its unveiling, the painting went on to be displayed at the White House.



*It's unknown whether this watercolor was a preliminary sketch for the oil painting or a watercolor copy executed by Grant after 1926.
USS Constitution Museum Collection, 2182.1*

³⁸ Andrews and Ratshesky, 9.

The original painting served as a prototype for 1,580,000 lithographic prints produced at a cost of 3.6 cents each.³⁹ Though Wilbur initially envisioned selling 3 million prints, just over a million of these prints were ultimately sold to the public, first at 25 cents, and then later for 50 cents. The prints were sold by mail order and on consignment at department stores, florists, banks, and individual businesses. An additional 200 salesmen across the country sold the prints at a 20 percent commission, though that salesforce diminished because of underwhelming returns.⁴⁰ Remaining prints were distributed at schools for 50 cents each. All net proceeds went toward the campaign.

On January 15, 1927, Wilbur submitted a proposal to Congress to authorize the sale of materials discarded from *Constitution* during repairs. Congress passed the resolution on March 3, 1927, allowing wood, copper, rope, and lead removed from the ship to be turned into souvenir items.

The tradition of distributing *Constitution* souvenirs may have begun in 1823, when Captain Isaac Hull had a small round box made from *Constitution* live oak and presented it to the Boston Athenaeum. Over 100 years later, the Save “Old Ironsides” Campaign was the first time souvenirs made from discarded materials from the ship were sold to the public to raise funds for repair work.

Various souvenirs were designed and manufactured in the Boston Navy Yard, including bronze and wooden bookends, bronze ashtrays, wooden gavels, and plaques displaying rope, copper, and bronze medallions. Advertisements began circulating in the spring of 1928 and the bulk of the items were sold for between 25 cents and \$35. The most expensive



Advertisements such as this one were used by the U.S. Navy to promote a variety of souvenirs for sale, including bookends, miniature cannons, ashtrays, plaques, and more.
USS Constitution Museum Collection, 2081.1

³⁹ Andrews and Ratshesky, 14.

⁴⁰ Andrews and Ratshesky, 15.

items were 41 mounted “Paul Revere bolts” which sold for a total of \$7,075. Various larger pieces of wood remnants were sold to individuals for use in building projects. The sale of these souvenirs not only add much-needed funds to the campaign but also helped reestablish “Old Ironsides” as an important historic American icon worth treasuring.

The 1930 campaign report listed the following souvenirs sold:⁴¹

Article	Selling Price	No. Sold
Copper Links	\$.50	1914
Pieces of Wood	1.00	1837
Pieces of cordage	.25	901
Paper knives	2.00	3284
Finger rings - wood	1.00	300
Copper book ends	10.00	7437
Wooden book ends	15.00	868
Copper Ash Trays	5.00	3561
Copper Pin Trays	5.00	932
Original wood frames	25.00	
Walking sticks	15.00	1504
Walking sticks-silver handle	25.00	10
Block & Gavel Sets	25.00	259
Ink Stands	13.00	157
Paul Revere Bolts-mounted	7975.00	41
Plaques	5.00	2075
Blotter Holders	5.00	207
Anchors	5.00	841
Paper Weights – cannon	5.00	71
Paper Weights – iron bolt	4.00	77
Cigarette box	10.00	238
Cigarette box	15.00	1509
Pieces of wood	2.00	328
Pieces of wood	3.00	185
Miniature cannons	35.00	230
Rope anchors	.50	320
Special souvenirs	Various	5685.45 Amt. Rec'd
Pieces of copper	“	1016.00 “ “
Pieces of wood	“	6786.30 “ “

⁴¹ Andrews and Ratshesky, 20.

The expenses to manufacture and sell the prints and souvenirs, however, amounted to 53 percent of the total net.⁴² Regardless, demand for prints and souvenirs remained high and brought in \$165,505.41 and \$123,746.65, respectively, for the fundraiser.⁴³

As of June 14, 1930, the top ten fundraising cities from all sources, in order, were: New York City, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Cincinnati, Washington, D.C., and Cleveland.⁴⁴

In the end, using funds gathered from public donations, souvenir sales, and an eventual Congressional appropriation of \$300,000 to close the gap, USS *Constitution* underwent a massive restoration in the Boston Navy Yard from 1927 to 1931 under the supervision of Lieutenant John A. Lord. With the rotted planks replaced and the leaks finally fixed, the ship floated out of dry dock into Boston Harbor in March of 1930.

“Thank You” Tour

As the Save “Old Ironsides” Campaign was winding down, the National Committee, with the approval of the Secretary of the Navy, had one more proposal. Upon completion of the restoration, the ship would make a tour of ports around the country as a “National Floating Memorial.” They argued that a national tour would bring “Old Ironsides” out of Massachusetts and give people from other parts of the country an opportunity to view the ship and tour its decks.⁴⁵

The National Committee was successful and on July 2, 1931, USS *Constitution* and a crew of 81 officers, sailors, and Marines set off on a three-year, three-coast tour around the United States. This National Cruise, under the command of Captain Louis J. Gulliver, was a public “thank you” to the people across the country who, from 1925 to 1930, donated pennies and materials to support the ship’s restoration.



A crowd of onlookers watch Constitution enter Portland, Oregon, on August 2, 1933. The photograph is signed by Louis J. Gulliver. USS Constitution Museum Collection. Armen Chakerian Gift. 1450.1

⁴² Andrews and Ratshesky, 25.

⁴³ Andrews and Ratshesky, Appendix 11.

⁴⁴ Philip Andrews, “Supplementary Report of the National Save Old Ironsides Committee, March 1, 1930 – June 14, 1930,” Appendix D, National Archives, Waltham, Massachusetts.

⁴⁵ Andrews and Ratshesky, 12.

Constitution, towed by the minesweeper USS *Grebe*, stopped at over 70 ports along the East, Gulf, and West coasts of the United States. At each port, throngs of visitors gathered to view the historic vessel. Among those captivated by the ship's arrival were the schoolchildren who were central to the Save "Old Ironsides" Campaign—an effort designed to both preserve the ship and spark a deeper interest in American history.

While pennies from schoolchildren did not save "Old Ironsides" alone, the \$154,000 raised is equivalent to approximately \$2.8 million today⁴⁶, demonstrating their remarkable dedication to the cause. The culmination of all the fundraising efforts helped ensure *Constitution*'s preservation, allowing future generations of students to walk the decks and connect firsthand with a symbol of America's naval heritage.



*Crowds of schoolchildren from Portland, Maine, visit Constitution in July 1931.
USS Constitution Museum Collection. Ralph Carson Gift. 1859.17*

⁴⁶ Calculated using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI Inflation Calculator as of July 2025.