



Binnacles and Compasses Aboard USS Constitution

“**Binnacle** – a wooden case or box, which contains the compasses, log-glasses, watch-glasses, and lights to [show] the compass at night.” ¹

“**Binnacle** – the wooden housing of the mariner’s compass and its correctors and illuminating arrangements....In addition to the compass and a light, the binnacle in older ships was the proper stowage for the...reel with the logline and chip and the 28-second glass used for measuring a ship’s speed. Charts in actual use, if any, were also properly stowed in the binnacle.” ²

1803, July Binnacles on *Constitution* are fitted with copper tops³

1812	“United States Navy Department for use of US Frigate <i>Constitution</i>			
	to G[edney] King	Dr	1812	
Octr 16 th	To repairing 2 azimuth Compasses			4.75
	do 1 amplitude	do		3.75
	do 2 Cabin	do		8.50
	do 7 brass binnacle	do		14.75
	do 4 wood “	do		5.50
	do 11 ½ hour glasses \$2.75	do 22 log No \$4.50		7.25
	do 1 Quadrant \$3.75 -	do 1 prospect glass \$4.75		8.50
	do 1 Metal Sextant \$3.50 -	do 1 do \$8		11.50
	do 1 Day & night glass \$1.75	do 1 do \$4.50		6.25
	1 patent transparent binnacle compass			15.00
	2 do binnacle lamps			10.00
				<u>\$95.75⁴</u>

What we can infer from the information provided by the 4th Auditor’s Report during the War of 1812, is that *Constitution* appears to have carried not only several compasses, but different types of compasses - note that 2 compasses are labeled “cabin”, indicating that they would be hung from the overhead in cabins (likely the captain’s and first lieutenant’s) so that even when below the officer could look up at the overhead compass and know that the ship was still on its proper course. One could conclude that because “2 patent binnacle lamps” are listed, that *Constitution* was outfitted with at least 2 binnacles, possibly the two just forward of the double wheel (see information immediately below concerning 2 binnacles displayed on one of the oldest known models of USS *Constitution*).

¹ William Burney, ed., *Falconer’s New Universal Dictionary of the Marine*, 1815 edition. (London: Chatham Publishing, 2006), 40.

² Peter Kemp, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 83.

³ William C. Hunneman bill, July 6, 1803. Samuel Brown Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁴ Information taken from 4th Auditor’s Settled Accounts NARA RG217 [Highlighted for this report]

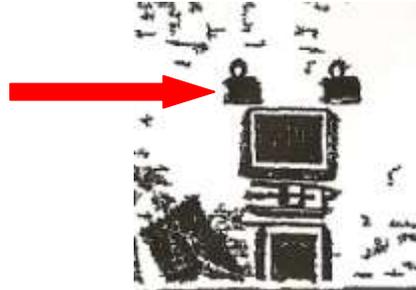
1812

Model of USS *Constitution*, made by the crew for Captain Isaac Hull, who then presented it to the East India Marine Society, Salem, MA, in July, 1813, shows 2 binnacles, port and starboard, with sloped tops and rectangular bases, located just forward of the mizzen mast, on either side of a small after hatch (ship's wheel missing from the model). The binnacles on the model are painted green to match the bulwarks.

c. 1820

“Plans of the Frigate *United States* Decks” by Charles Ware.

NOTE: 2 binnacles located just forward of *United States*' double wheel, forward of the mizzen mast – see detail from the spar deck plan below:



Detail, spar deck, USS *United States* plan, c. 1820

It appears that USS *Constitution* and her near sister ship USS *United States* each carried 2 binnacles (likely of simple design – note the plainness of the binnacles on the 1812 *Constitution* model) by their double wheels in the period of the War of 1812. Having 2 binnacles allowed the lead helmsman (the helmsman who stood on the “weather” side of the forward wheel and executed the officer’s directions), no matter if he was standing on the port or starboard side of the wheel, the opportunity to clearly see a compass and so be better able to stay on course when sailing.

Post-1897

When *Constitution* was brought back to the Charlestown Navy Yard for her 100th anniversary in 1897, there were no binnacles aboard.

**1931-34
National Cruise**

After the re-building of the ship in the 1927-31 restoration, several different binnacles were installed for the National Cruise.



National Cruise, c.1931 – binnacle (c.1850-era) aft of *Constitution*'s mizzen mast; binnacle installed for cruise, it had with USS *Constitution*. US Navy photo.



National Cruise, c. 1931 – binnacle (c. 1890-era) forward of wheel; binnacle installed for cruise, no other history it had no other history with USS *Constitution*; today this binnacle is on loan to the USS *Constitution* Museum. US Navy photo.

1951 – Present

The binnacles that are installed on *Constitution*'s spar deck today appear in photographs of the ship c. 1951. It is not known if these binnacles

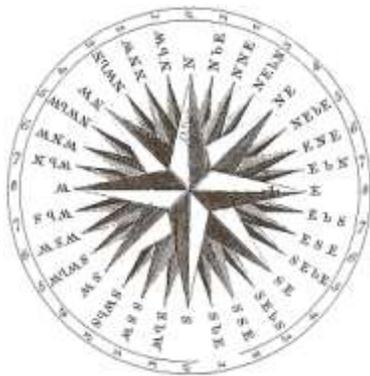
were made in the Charlestown Navy Yard in 1951 or earlier. Whoever made them or had them installed may have been following the designs of the binnacles found on the 1812 model of *Constitution* at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM). Inside the binnacles are modern, late 20th century compasses. Although the binnacles do not have lamps installed, you can see the small, circular platform at the top of the binnacle which could accommodate a lamp for use at night. A compass card and its magnetic needle of the War of 1812 period would have looked very different – see the example below.



USS *Constitution*, Spar Deck, July, 2011.
Naval History and Heritage Command Detachment
Boston photo



Close-up, port binnacle with modern compass, July, 2011
Naval History and Heritage Command Detachment
Boston photo



Compass rose, c. 1815 - *Falconer's New Universal Dictionary of the Marine*