USS Constitution’s Wheel

1804
Based upon the fact that USS Constitution’s 1804 Watch & Quarter Bill records two men only for manning the ship’s wheel, it has been inferred that Constitution originally had a single wheel.¹

1809
February
Midshipman John M. Funck’s Watch & Quarter Bill notes that four men are listed for the ship’s wheel – it is inferred, therefore, that Constitution was now fitted with a double wheel.²

Detail, spar deck plan, USS United States, c. 1820, Charles Ware; note double wheel

1812
Dec. 29
In the battle with HMS Java, USS Constitution’s double wheel was shot away: “The following Minutes Were Taken during the Action.
At 2.10 P.M. Commenced The Action...
At 2.30 P.M. our wheel was shot entirely away…”³

[USS Constitution was steered for the rest of the battle by crew who were stationed at the emergency tiller aft of the Officers’ Ward Room, 3 decks below.]

USS Constitution returned to Boston in early 1813, after her second War of 1812 victory against a British Royal Navy frigate. Constitution had sustained a great deal of battle

¹ USS Constitution Watch & Quarter Bill [1803], 1804; collections of The American Antiquarian Society


damage, however, and in order to sail home, Java’s double wheel was removed (before Java was blown up) and installed on Constitution’s quarter deck. For many months into 1813, repairs to the ship continued, including replacing Java’s double wheel.

**1813**
18 August  “Making Stearing [sic] Wheel…”

**1839**
4 May  USS Constitution’s log notes that a new wheel was received on the ship\(^5\) [The 1839 wheel probably replaced the 1813 wheel]

**1872-77**  USS Constitution underwent a lengthy re-building at the Philadelphia Navy Yard (the work was in fits and starts over several years). There is a story that Constitution’s wheel was removed at this time and placed aboard USS Potomac which had been sold to a New Jersey scrap yard; Potomac needed a wheel, so Constitution’s was appropriated so that Potomac could be steered to the scrap yard. Whether or not Constitution’s wheel was removed and placed aboard Potomac cannot be verified at this time with the extant Navy documentation.

**Post-1877**  USS Constitution was sailed to Le Havre, France in 1878 to carry the United States exhibits to the Paris Exposition. After that voyage, she once again became a sail training vessel for the US Navy. The last time she sailed on active duty was October 2, 1881. Obviously, Constitution was fitted with a wheel after the Philadelphia re-build and this wheel would remain on her until replaced in the 1927-1931 restoration. Within months of her final 1881 sail, she was towed to the Portsmouth Naval Shipyards and received a “barn” which transformed her into a receiving ship for the Navy (see photos below).

**1927-31**  USS Constitution was re-built (85% of the ship was “renewed,” as stated by the

\(^4\) ‘the [sic] United States Navy Department to T & R Howe Dr for Work done to Frigate Constitution’ – In 4\(^{th}\) Auditor’s Settled Accounts (Selected Survey), RG217, National Archives & Records Administration (NARA). The bill was settled by Amos Binney, Naval Agent on 22 November 1813 and approved by Charles Stewart.

\(^5\) USS Constitution Log Book, NARA
US Navy’s final report) and as part of the refurbishment, a new double wheel was made for the ship by Hyde Windlass Company in Bath, ME. (see photo below)

![After spar deck, USS Constitution, c. 1931](image1)

After spar deck, USS Constitution, c. 1931
US Navy Photo

![After spar deck, USS Constitution, July, 2011](image2)

After spar deck, USS Constitution, July, 2011
NHHC Detachment Boston Photo

**1931-1980s** The double wheel made for USS Constitution’s 1927 restoration remained on board until the mid-to-late 1980s when it was removed and loaned to the USS Constitution Museum for exhibition. The wheel that is currently aboard the ship is the wheel that replaced the 1927 wheel (photo, above right).

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