



## 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.<sup>1</sup>

**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.<sup>2</sup>



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..."<sup>3</sup>  
[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

---

<sup>1</sup> USS *Constitution* Watch & Quarter Bill [1803], 1804; collections of The American Antiquarian Society

<sup>2</sup> Midshipman John M. Funck, Watch & Quarter Bill, 1809, Samuel Eliot Morison Memorial Library, USS Constitution Museum.

<sup>3</sup> 'Extract from Commodore [William] Bainbridge's Journal Kept on board the U.S. Frigate Constitution', as quoted in *The Naval War of 1812, A Documentary History*, Volume 1, ed. William Dudley. (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1985), 641.

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...”<sup>4</sup>

**1839**

4 May USS *Constitution's* log notes that a new wheel was received on the ship<sup>5</sup>  
[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 Shipyard and received a “barn” which transformed her into a receiving ship for the Navy (see photos below).



USS *Constitution*, Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, c. 1895  
US Navy Photo



Spar deck, USS *Constitution*, showing double wheel, c. 1895  
US Navy Photo

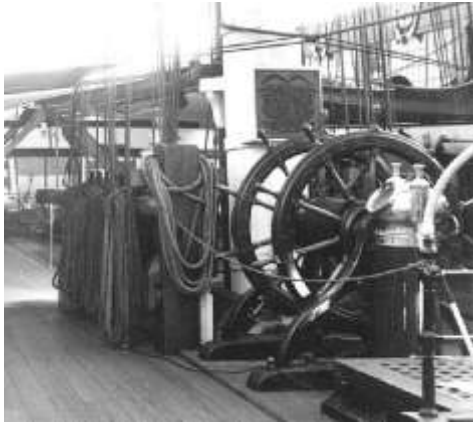
**1927-31** USS *Constitution* was re-built (85% of the ship was “renewed,” as stated by the

---

<sup>4</sup> ‘the [sic] United States Navy Department to T & R Howe Dr for Work done to Frigate Constitution’ – In 4<sup>th</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> 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  
US Navy Photo



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).