

# “Old Ironsides in San Diego”

*Rebuilt by the pennies of school children and as sound as on that autumn day more than 135 years ago when she slid down the ways . . . the U.S.S. Constitution, most famous vessel in the American navy, is due alongside Broadway pier this forenoon.*

--San Diego Union, January 21, 1933.

The most storied Navy ship in American history began a triumphal tour of the West Coast in January 1933. After four years of costly restoration, the USS *Constitution* was in the midst of a three-year tour of the nation's coastal cities that had begun Portsmouth, New Hampshire in July 1931.

The famous ship had been launched in Boston harbor in 1797, as one of the first capital ships of the young U.S. Navy. Over 200 feet long and 44 feet wide, the frigate required wood from sixty acres of trees for its construction. Paul Revere forged her metal bolts and a 242-pound ships bell. A significant structural feature would be the 21-inch thick hull, made from dense, Southern live oak.

Carrying a crew of 450 men and fifty guns, the *Constitution* went to war in 1798. In the next six years the warship skirmished against the French in the “Quasi-War” and fought Barbary pirates off the “shores of Tripoli.” Lasting fame came in the War of 1812 when it fought the British warship HMS *Guerriere*. As British cannon balls appeared to bounce harmlessly off the oak hull of the *Constitution*, a surprised sailor shouted “Huzzah! Her sides are made of iron!”

Announcement for the launch of the USS *Constitution*.

“Old Ironsides” continued active service for several more decades, serving in Mediterranean and Pacific squadrons. She circled the world in 1840s and became a training ship during the Civil War. Public adoration of the frigate protected her from the scrap yard when official retirement came in 1881. Periodic restorations bare her afloat after designation as a museum ship in 1907.

By 1924 the ship was deteriorating badly. A Navy inspection board found the leaky hull had to be pumped out daily; the decayed stern appeared ready to fall off, and patches of cement plugged holes everywhere. But the board recognized the ship's iconic status with the American people and recommended the *Constitution* be rebuilt and preserved “for the greatest length of time practicable as a seaworthy vessel.”

A public fund raising crusade began for a complete restoration. School children provided much of the campaign impetus by donating pennies for “Old Ironsides” and would ultimately contribute \$148,000 toward the project. When donations lagged Congress stepped up with \$300,000 to complete the restoration, which cost in total nearly \$1 million.

## *Navy-Yard.*

BOSTON, September 18, 1797.

THE Contractor, having extended to his fellow-citizens all reasonable gratification of their laudable curiosity, during the progress of the building, believes he may, with propriety, make the following request and suggestions, on the operation of launching the frigate CONSTITUTION.

That (excepting the President of the United States, the Governor, Lieut. Governor, and their respective suites, and others specially admitted, who will, comparatively, be very few) no person will attempt, in any way, to pass into the limits of the Navy Yard.

The reason of this request is obviously to prevent interruption or confusion, which might be injurious, or ruinous, to the act of launching, which will be critical, under the most favorable circumstances, and indispensably requiring perfect silence and obedience to orders. Independent of this conclusive reason, the danger of encroaching spectators would be imminent, from the occasional and abrupt falling of bodies, used in the construction of the ship—a conformity therefore, to this request, is earnestly solicited.

It is suggested, as the tide will be full, that it would be necessary to the safety of the spectators, particularly women and children, that they do not approach in crowds too near the margin of the contiguous wharves, as the sudden entrance of so large a body as the Frigate, will occasion an instantaneous swell of the water, the height of which cannot be easily calculated, and against which, therefore, the discretion of the people ought amply to guard.

It is to be regretted, in this instance, that the Yard, and the places around it, are too contracted for an occasion, which will probably excite so much desire, and in which all the citizens have so much interest; it is therefore submitted to those, who can conveniently make the arrangement, to place themselves in vessels, or water crafts, at due distances, upon the profile or sides of the Frigate, but by no means too near, either in a right line, or otherwise, as the direction may be uncertain, nor to load open boats too deeply, as the agitation of the water, even at a considerable distance, may be somewhat hazardous.

It is also recommended, to those who erect stages to accommodate spectators, that they have them well secured, in every respect, as the loss of life of a single citizen, would mar the satisfaction and pleasure that the Contractor otherwise would enjoy, of building, and conducting into the ocean, a POWERFUL AGENT OF NATIONAL JUSTICE, which hope dictates may become the just pride and ornament of the American name.

**GEORGE CLAGHORN.**

On July 2, 1931, the rebuilt *Constitution* set off on 90-city tour of the nation. Restored as seaworthy (but not necessarily “sail worthy”) the old frigate would be towed between ports by the Navy minesweeper *Grebe*. For longer voyages on the open sea the submarine tender *Bushnell* would provide the tow. After touring the east and southern coasts, where enthusiastic crowds greeted her at every stop, the *Constitution* entered the Pacific from the Panama Canal in January 1933.

At the end of 1800 feet of steel cable from the *Bushnell*, the *Constitution* crept up the coast of Mexico toward California, with the *Grebe* following astern. It was rough two-week voyage. A storm in the Gulf of Tehuantepec gave the ship a “severe wrenching” with gale force winds but on January 21 the ship safely approached San Diego.

Navy seaplanes were the first to greet the *Constitution*, dipping close to take photographs. The tugboat USS *Koka* met the ship eight miles south of Point Loma, carrying newsreel men and reporters. The tug then raced back to port to give the newsmen time to set up cameras on the Broadway Pier.

Crews from the aircraft carriers *Saratoga* and *Lexington*, anchored in Coronado Roads, saluted as the historic ship passed by. When the *Constitution* passed the cruiser *Raleigh*, the ship’s band struck up the “Star Spangled Banner” as the crew of “Old Ironsides” stood at attention.



At the foot of Broadway, a huge crowd was on hand to welcome the ship as it dropped anchor. Thousands of excited children—the “stockholders”—whose pennies, nickels, and dimes had made the ship’s restoration possible, began scrambling on board when the gangway opened at 1:00. For the remainder of the afternoon “the famous old vessel was packed with humanity.”

USS *Constitution* docked at the foot of Broadway, 1933. *Courtesy Maritime Museum of San Diego.*

The *Constitution* stayed in port for three weeks, open for visitors each day from 10-5. Close to nine thousand people toured the frigate daily. School groups trooped through the ship regularly,

many of them bused from inland communities or brought south on special trains from Anaheim and Fullerton.

The ship's decks were filled with carefully labeled exhibits. Gun-sponges, rammers, and boarding-pikes were displayed with the 24-pounder long guns. The grog-tub (rum), harness-cask (salted provisions), and scuttle-butt (drinking water) were there along with pewter mess gear. In the ships' brig leg irons and cat-of-nine tails hanging on a bulkhead illustrated the grim discipline enforced on early Navy seamen. But there was also the comfortable captain's cabin to see, where 31 different men had lived as they commanded the ship over its 136-year history.



“Old Ironsides” in October 1910

The *Constitution* continued its Pacific Coast tour in mid-February. In San Pedro a “human sea” of 478,000 people saw the ship over ten days. The line to board was reportedly three miles long. Another 21 port visits followed, each with spectacular visitation numbers.

The ship returned south in November and San Diego won a spirited competition with Los Angeles to host the *Constitution* over the winter. The frigate spent four months anchored at the Navy pier at the foot of E Street for repairs and refitting for the long voyage home. Thousands more visited the ship before she departed on March 22—arriving in Boston harbor on May 7, 1934.

Permanently berthed today at the Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston harbor, the oldest commissioned naval ship in the world is currently undergoing a three-year restoration to prepare for the bicentennial of the War of 1812.

---

Originally published as “San Diegans lined up to tour Old Ironsides,” by Richard Crawford in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Jan 7, 2010. p. CZ.1