

Christening, Launching, and Commissioning of U.S. Navy Ships

by John C. Reilly

Head, Ships History Branch

[Christening and Launching](#)

[Fitting Out and Commissioning](#)

Christening and Launching

In the name of the United States I christen thee _____," proclaims the sponsor while she shatters the ceremonial bottle of champagne against the gleaming bow of a new ship towering above her. As if the sponsor's very words have injected a spark of life, the ship begins to move slowly from the security of the building way to the water environment where she will play her destined role for the defense of the United States.

When a woman accepts the Secretary of the Navy's invitation to sponsor a new ship, she has agreed to stand as the central figure in an event with a heritage reaching backward into the dim recesses of recorded history. Just as the passage of years has witnessed momentous changes in ships, so also has the christening-launching ceremony we know today evolved from earlier practices. Nevertheless, the tradition, meaning, and spiritual overtones remain constant. The vast size, power, and unpredictability of the sea must certainly have awed the first sailors to venture far from shore. Instinctively, they would seek divine protection for themselves and their craft from the capricious nature of wind and water. A Babylonian narrative dating from the third millennium B.C., describes the completion of a ship:

Openings to the water I stopped; I searched for cracks and the wanting parts I fixed; Three sari of bitumen I poured over the outside; To the gods I caused oxen to be sacrificed.

Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans called on their gods to protect seamen. The favor of the monarch of the seas--Poseidon in Greek mythology, the Roman Neptune--was often evoked. Ship launching participants in ancient Greece wreathed their heads with olive branches, drank wine to honor the gods, and poured water on the new vessel as a symbol of blessing. Shrines were carried on board Greek and Roman ships, and this practice extended into the Middle Ages. The shrine was usually placed at the quarter-deck; on a modern United States Navy ship, the quarterdeck area still has a special ceremonial significance.

Different peoples and cultures shaped the religious ceremonies surrounding a ship launching. Jews and Christians alike customarily used wine and water as they called upon God to safeguard them at sea. Intercession of the saints and the blessing of the church were asked by Christians. Ship launchings in the Ottoman Empire were accompanied by prayers to Allah, the sacrifice of sheep, and appropriate feasting. The Vikings are said to have offered human sacrifice to appease the angry gods of the northern seas.

Chaplain Henry Teonge of Britain's Royal Navy left an interesting account of a warship launch, a "briganteen of 23 oars," by the Knights of Malta in 1675:

Two fryers and an attendant went into the vessel, and kneeling down prayed halfe an houre, and

laid their hands on every mast, and other places of the vessel, and sprinkled her all over with holy water. Then they came out and hoisted a pendent to signify she was a man of war; then at once thrust her into the water.

While the liturgical aspects of ship christenings continued in Catholic countries, the Reformation seems, for a time, to have put a stop to them in Protestant Europe. By the seventeenth century, for example, English launchings were secular affairs. The christening party for the launch of the 64 gun ship-of-the-line Prince Royal in 1610 included the Prince of Wales and famed naval constructor Phineas Pett, who was master shipwright at the Woolwich yard. Pett described the proceedings:

The noble Prince . . . accompanied with the Lord Admiral and the great lords, were on the poop, where the standing great gilt cup was ready filled with wine to name the ship so soon as she had been afloat, according to ancient custom and ceremony performed at such times, and heaving the standing cup overboard. His Highness then standing upon the poop with a selected company only, besides the trumpeters, with a great deal of expression of princely joy, and with the ceremony of drinking in the standing cup, threw all the wine forwards towards the half-deck, and solemnly calling her by name of the Prince Royal, the trumpets sounding the while, with many gracious words to me, gave the standing cup into my hands.

The "standing cup" was a large loving cup fashioned of precious metal. When the ship began to slide down the ways, the presiding official took a ceremonial sip of wine from the cup, and poured the rest on the deck or over the bow. Usually the cup was thrown over the side and belonged to the lucky retriever. As navies grew larger and launchings more frequent, economy dictated that the costly cup be caught in a net for reuse at other launchings. Late in seventeenth-century Britain, the "standing cup" ceremony was replaced by the practice of breaking a bottle across the bow.

Sponsors of English warships were customarily members of the royal family, senior naval officers, or Admiralty officials. A few civilians were invited to sponsor Royal Navy ships during the nineteenth century, and women became sponsors for the first time. In 1875, a religious element was returned to naval christenings by Princess Alexandra, wife of the Prince of Wales, when she introduced an Anglican choral service in the launching ceremony for battleship Alexandra. The usage continues with the singing of Psalm 107 with its special meaning to mariners:

They that go down to the sea in ships; That do business in great waters; These see the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep.

French ship launchings and christenings in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were accompanied by unique rites closely resembling marriage and baptismal ceremonies. A godfather for the new ship presented a god-mother with a bouquet of flowers as both said the ship's name. No bottle was broken, but a priest pronounced the vessel named and blessed it with holy water.

American ceremonial practices for christening and launching quite naturally had their roots in Europe. Descriptions of launching Revolutionary War naval vessels are not plentiful, but a local newspaper detailed the launch of Continental frigate Raleigh at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in

May 1776:

On Tuesday the 21st inst. the Continental Frigate of thirty-two guns, built at this place, ... was Launched amidst the acclamation of many thousand spectators. She is esteemed by all those who are judges that have seen her, to be one of the compleatest ships ever built in America. The unwearied diligence and care of the three Master-Builders ... and the good order and industry of the Carpenters, deserve particular notice; scarcely a single instance of a person's being in liquor, or any difference among the men in the yard during the time of her building, every man with pleasure exerting himself to the utmost: and altho' the greatest care was taken that only the best of timber was used, and the work perform'd in a most masterly manner, the whole time from her raising to the day she launched did not exceed sixty working days, and what afforded a most pleasing view (which was manifest in the countenances of the Spectators) this noble fabrick was compleatly to her anchors in the main channel, in less than six minutes from the time she run, without the least hurt; and what is truly remarkable, not a single person met with the least accident in launching, tho' near five hundred men were employed in and about her when run off.

It was customary for the builders to celebrate a ship launching. Rhode Island authorities, charged with overseeing construction of frigates Warren and Providence, voted the sum of fifty dollars to the master builder of each yard "to be expended in providing an entertainment for the carpenters that worked on the ships." Five pounds was spent for lime juice for the launching festivities of frigate Delaware at Philadelphia, suggesting that the "entertainment" included a potent punch with lime juice as an ingredient.

No mention of christening a Continental Navy ship during the American Revolution has come to light. The first ships of the Continental Navy, Alfred, Cabot, Andrew Doria, and Columbus, were former merchantmen and their names were assigned during conversion and outfitting. Later, when Congress authorized the construction of thirteen frigates, no names were assigned until after four had launched.

The first description we have of an American warship christening is that of Constitution, famous "Old Ironsides," at Boston, 21 October 1797. Her sponsor, Captain James Sever, USN, stood on the weather deck at the bow. "At fifteen minutes after twelve she commenced a movement into the water with such steadiness, majesty and exactness as to fill every heart with sensations of joy and delight." As Constitution ran out, Captain Sever broke a bottle of fine old Madeira over the heel of the bowsprit.

Frigate President had an interesting launching, 10 April 1800, at New York:

Was launched yesterday morning, at ten o'clock, in the presence of perhaps as great a concourse of people as ever assembled in this city on any occasion. At nine, captain Ten-Eyck's company of artillery . . . , accompanied by the uniform volunteer companies of the sixth regiment and the corps of riflemen, marched in procession . . . and took their station alongside the frigate. Every thing being prepared, and the most profound silence prevailing, . . . At a given signal she glided into the waters, a sublime spectacle of gracefulness and grandeur. Immediately on touching the water federal salutes were fired from the sloop of war Portsmouth, the revenue cutter Jay . . . and the Aspasia, Indiaman. These were returned by the uniform companies on shore, who fired

a feu-de-joye, and marched off the ground to the battery ... and were dismissed.

As the nineteenth century progressed, we see that American ship launchings continued to be festive occasions, but with no set ritual except that the sponsor or sponsors used some "christening fluid" as the ship received her name. Sloop-of-war Concord, launched in 1827, was "christened by a young lady of Portsmouth." This is the first known instance of a woman sponsoring a United States Navy vessel. Unfortunately, the contemporary account does not name this pioneer female sponsor.

The first identified woman sponsor was Miss Lavinia Fanning Watson, daughter of a prominent Philadelphian. She broke a bottle of wine and water over the bow of sloop-of-war Germantown at the Philadelphia Navy Yard on 22 August 1846.

Women as sponsors became increasingly the rule, but not universally so. As sloop-of-war Plymouth "glided along the inclined plane," in 1846, "two young sailors, one stationed at each side of her head, anointed her with bottles, and named her as she left her cradle for the deep." And as late as 1898, torpedo boat Mackenzie was christened by the son of the builder.

Although wine is the traditional "christening fluid," numerous other liquids have been used. Princeton and Raritan were sent on their way in 1843 with whiskey. Seven years later, "a bottle of best brandy was broken over the bow of steam sloop Sun Jacinto." "Steam frigate Merrimack, who would earn her place in naval history as Confederate ironclad Virginia, was baptized with water from the Merrimack River. Admiral Farragut's famous Civil War flagship, steam sloop Hartford, was christened by three sponsors--two young ladies broke bottles of Connecticut River and Hartford spring water, while the third sponsor, a naval lieutenant, completed the ceremony with a bottle of sea water.

Champagne, perhaps because of its elegance as the aristocrat of wines, came into popular use as a "christening fluid" as the nineteenth century closed. A granddaughter of Secretary of the Navy Benjamin P. Tracy wet the bow of Maine, the Navy's first steel battleship, with champagne at the New York Navy Yard, 18 November 1890.

The effects of national prohibition on alcoholic beverages were reflected to some extent in ship christenings. Cruisers Pensacola and Houston, for example, were christened with water; the submarine V-6 with cider. However, battleship California appropriately received her name with California wine in 1919. Champagne returned in 1922, but for that occasion only, for the launch of light cruiser Trenton.

Rigid naval airships Los Angeles, Shenandoah, Akron, and Macon, built during the 1920s and early 1930s, were carried on the Naval Vessel Register, and formally commissioned. The earliest First Lady to act as sponsor was Mrs. Calvin Coolidge who christened dirigible Los Angeles. When Mrs. Herbert Hoover christened Akron in 1931, the customary bottle was not used. Instead, the First Lady pulled a cord which opened a hatch in the airship's towering nose to release a flock of pigeons.

Thousands of ships of every description, the concerted effort of mobilized American industry,

came off the ways during World War II to be molded into the mightiest navy the world had ever seen. The historic christening-launching ceremonies continued, but travel restrictions, other war-time considerations, and sheer numbers dictated that such occasions be less elaborate than those in the years before the nation was engaged in desperate worldwide combat.

The actual physical process of launching a new ship from her building site to the water involves three principal methods. Oldest, most familiar, and most widely used is the "end-on" launch in which the vessel slides, usually stern first, down an inclined shipway. The "side launch," whereby the ship enters the water broadside, came into nineteenth-century use on inland waters, rivers, and lakes, and was given major impetus by the World War II building program. Another method involves ships built in basins or graving docks. When ready, ships constructed in this manner are floated by admitting water into the dock.

Fitting Out and Commissioning

Christening and launching are the inseparable elements which endow a ship hull with her identity. Yet, just as many developmental milestones must be passed before one takes his place in society, so too must the newly-launched vessel pass such milestones before she is completed and considered ready to be designated a commissioned ship of the United States Navy. The engineering plant, weapon and electronic systems, galley, and multitudinous other equipment required to transform the new hull into an operating and habitable warship are installed and tested. The prospective commanding officer, ship's officers, the petty officers, and seamen who will form the crew report for training and intensive familiarization with their new ship. Crew and ship must function in total unison if full potential and maximum effectiveness are to be realized. The most modern naval vessel embodying every advantage of advanced technology is only as good as those who man her.

Prior to commissioning, the new ship undergoes sea trials during which deficiencies needing correction are uncovered. The preparation and readiness time between christening-launching and commissioning may be as much as three years for a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier to as brief as twenty days for a World War II landing ship. Monitor, of Civil War fame, was commissioned less than three weeks after launch.

Commissioning in the early United States Navy under sail was attended by no ceremony. An officer designated to command a new ship received orders similar to those issued to Captain Thomas Truxtun in 1798:

Sir, I have it in command from the president of the United States, to direct you to repair with all due speed on board the ship Constellation lying at Baltimore. It is required that no Time be lost in carrying the Ship into deep water, taking on board her Cannon, Ammunition, Water, Provisions & Stores of every kind completing what work is yet to be done shipping her Complement of Seamen and Marines, and preparing her in every respect for Sea . . . It is the President's express Orders, that you employ the most vigorous Exertions, to accomplish these several Objects and to put your Ship as speedily as possible in a situation to sail at the shortest notice.

Captain Truxtun's orders reveal that a prospective commanding officer had responsibility for

overseeing construction details, outfitting the ship, and recruiting his crew. When a captain of this period in our history determined that his new ship was ready to take to sea, he mustered the crew on deck, read his orders, broke the national ensign and distinctive commissioning pennant, caused the watch to be set, and the first entry to be made in the log. Thus, the ship was placed in commission.

Commissionings were not public affairs and, unlike christening-launching ceremonies, no accounts of them are to be found in contemporary newspapers. The first specific references to commissioning located in naval records is a letter of 6 November 1863 from Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles to all navy yards and stations. The Secretary directed: "Hereafter the commandants of navy yards and stations will inform the Department, by special report of the date when each vessel preparing for sea service at their respective commands, is placed in commission."

Subsequently, various editions of Navy Regulations mentioned the act of putting a ship in commission, but details of a commissioning ceremony were not prescribed. Through custom and usage, however, a fairly standard practice emerged, the essentials of which are outlined in current Navy Regulations.

Officers and crew members of the new ship are assembled on the quarterdeck or other suitable area. Formal transfer of the ship to the prospective commanding officer is done by the Naval District Commandant or his representative. The transferring officer reads the commissioning directive, the national anthem is played, the ensign is hoisted, and commissioning pennant broken. The prospective commanding officer reads his orders, assumes command, and the first watch is set.

Craft assigned to Naval Districts and shore bases for local use, such as harbor tugs and floating drydocks, are not usually placed "in commission" but are in an "in service" status. They do fly the national ensign, but not a commissioning Pennant.

In recent years, commissioning ceremonies have come to be public occasions more than heretofore had been the practice. Guests, including the ship's sponsor, are frequently invited to attend, and a prominent individual may deliver a commissioning address. On 3 May 1975, more than twenty thousand people witnessed the commissioning of USS Nimitz (CVAN-68) at Norfolk, Virginia. The carrier's sponsor, daughter of the late Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, was introduced, and the President of the United States was the principal speaker.

Whether for a massive nuclear aircraft carrier, destroyer, submarine, or amphibious type, the brief but impressive commissioning ceremony completes the cycle from christening and launching to full status as a ship of the United States Navy. Now, regardless of size and mission, the vessel and her crew stand ready to take their place in America's historic heritage of the sea.

Published: Mon Jun 23 15:34:41 EDT 2014