

COLONEL GEORGE CLAGHORN

BUILDER OF CONSTITUTION

By WILLIAM M. EMERY



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COLONEL GEORGE CLAGHORN, BUILDER OF CONSTITUTION

Story of New Bedford Man Who Constructed Navy's Most
Famous Frigate After Winning Celebrity as Master
Shipwright Here -- Thousands Cheered the
Boston Launching in 1797

By WILLIAM M. EMERY

Lying in a berth at the Charlestown Navy Yard the ancient frigate Constitution is again being rebuilt and refitted, that she may once more put to sea. Her usefulness as a naval vessel ended, of course, many years ago, but when the present work of reconstruction is completed she is to be exhibited in various ports along the coast as an object lesson in American history. Nation-wide sentiment for the famous old fighting ship has again intervened to prevent her utter annihilation.

She was built, as every inhabitant here should know, by Colonel George Claghorn, a New Bedford man, and launched at Boston in 1797. Never was a wooden warship more powerfully and carefully constructed, as evidenced by the fact that it estimated that about fifteen per cent of the original craft still remains intact in her hull, including a part of the keelson and other timbers fashioned from the stoutest live oak that the South could produce. Her builder was a renowned shipwright of his day, and his selection as naval constructor by the national government was long a matter of pride with his fellow townsmen. Some scraps of information regarding him have come down to us, but as no full account of his career has been hitherto assembled it seems appropriate to record it now when renewed interest and enthusiasm in his chief piece of work is to be awakened.

CLAGHORN OF VINEYARD ANCESTRY

Colonel George Claghorn, while yet a young man, came to New Bedford from Marthas Vineyard prior to the Revolutionary War. He was a great-grandson of James Claghorn of Cape Cod, one of those brave Scotchmen captured at the battle of Dunbar, and deported overseas by order of Cromwell. This progenitor settled in Barnstable. A number of his grandchildren, including Shubael Claghorn, father of George, removed to Marthas Vineyard and from there the family spread out to various states. They were a sturdy race, men of good calibre, and inheriting the spirit of the old ancestor who had fought against what he conceived to be oppression, many of them bore their part in the French and Indian conflicts, the Revolution, and indeed, in subsequent years, in other wars. Shubael, father of George, was a soldier in the Louisburg expedition of 1745, and Colonel Claghorn, as well as his two brothers, and other relatives, served in the Revolution. With such a background it is fitting that one of this stock should have been the constructor of the most famous vessel known in the history of the American navy.

Colonel Claghorn was born in Chilmark July 6, 1748, one of a family of seven children. His mother, who was Experience Hawes, was left a widow when the boy was six years old. It is not known when George came to New Bedford to live; it may have been as early as 1767, when his older cousin, Captain William Claghorn, bought a house lot here. At any event, on December 20, 1769, in his 22nd year, he married Deborah Brownell of Dartmouth, of which New Bedford was then still a part, and the marriage is entered on the Dartmouth town records. Within 24 years eight children were born to the couple, the last survivor, Grace, wife of William Beebe, dying in North Attleboro in 1883 at the age of 101 years, 17 days.

ARRIVES IN BEDFORD VILLAGE

When young Claghorn arrived on the mainland, Bedford Village was an infant community, but growing vigorously. Joseph Russell and the Kemptons were vieing with one another in selling off house lots from their vast farms lying respectively south and north of Elm street, and extending from the waterfront well out into the country. George undoubtedly plied his trade as a journeyman shipwright, and

eventually was enabled to go into business for himself. In 1774 he and his wife, Deborah, purchased of Ephraim Kempton a lot containing $53\frac{1}{2}$ rods at the southwest corner of the present North Second and North streets, and in 1785 Jabez Hathaway sold them the piece of land, area not stated, adjoining at the south. On the corner property Claghorn built a dwelling of one story facing the west, which he occupied, and his shipyard was on the premises. At that time the waterfront was not far east of Second street. North street, down which the logs were hauled to the shipyard, was only a cart path, and possibly not even that. It was not until 1787 that North street was laid out as an accepted highway by the town, and North Second street did not officially become a thoroughfare until 1794.

A complete record of the vessels built by Colonel Claghorn is not known to be in existence. One of his most famous achievements was the ship *Rebecca*, said to have been the first American whaler to double Cape Horn and secure a cargo of oil in the Pacific ocean. She was owned by Joseph Russell & Sons, and was named for Russell's eldest daughter, the wife of the first Daniel Ricketson. The *Rebecca* slid off the ways in March, 1785. Although of only 175 tons she was considered a mammoth vessel for the times, and people from all the towns as far away as Taunton and Bridgewater visited her as an object of wonder. A well-known anecdote in connection with the vessel, related by the later Daniel Ricketson, is familiar to us historians, but may be repeated here as possibly new to many readers.

BURYING THE REBECCA'S FIGURE-HEAD

"A handsome female figure-head had been made in Philadelphia for the *Rebecca*, and was placed upon her previous to launching; but there being considerable objection to it on the part of the members of the Society of Friends, of which the owners were members, it was removed. A mock funeral was held by a few gay young men, among them sons of Joseph Russell, and it was buried in the sand upon the shore."

Another important piece of construction was an even larger ship, the *Barclay*, launched in October, 1793. New Bedford's first newspaper, the *Medley*, John Spooner, editor, in its weekly edition of Oct. 18, 1893, announced the impending event as follows:

"Tomorrow morning between the hours of 7 and 8 the new and beautiful ship Barckley, burthen 270 tons, will be launched from the shipyard of Colonel George Claghorn. The satisfaction of viewing this token of our increasing commerce will, we doubt not, induce many to watch the first beams of the Rising Sun."

The succeeding issue of the Medley stated that a large crowd watched the gala spectacle. As the ship successfully took the water there were "repeated huzzas and 15 discharges of cannon. Claghorn by this time had fully established his reputation as a skillful builder of large vessels.

CLAGHORN'S WAR RECORD

His service in the Revolutionary army stretched over parts of five years, and was like that of many other soldiers, only for a few weeks or months at a time. He first appears as first lieutenant of Captain Manasseh Kempton's Dartmouth company in the spring of 1776. In the fall of 1777 he was in a company that went on a secret expedition to Rhode Island. In 1779 he was captain of the first company in Colonel Hathaway's regiment, and again the following year was a captain commanding a company, this time in Colonel Abel Mitchell's regiment. In 1781 he was commissioned major in Colonel William Turner's regiment for service in Rhode Island.

In 1779 Captain Claghorn served the patriotic cause in a civil capacity, acting as agent for the Bedford section of Dartmouth in receiving moneys from drafted men who paid for their release from military duty, Quakers and others; and making payments to soldiers who were awarded bounties. The "Account of the town of Dartmouth with Captain George Claghorn" in this connection is given in detail in Ellis' History of New Bedford.

Claghorn's highest military title did not come from his Revolutionary service. Some years later he was commissioned a colonel in the militia, commanding the Second Regiment, Second Brigade, Fifth Division. It was considered a great honor to attain such high military rank. In the issue of the New Bedford Medley of May 29, 1793, was printed a set of regimental orders issued by Colonel Claghorn.

Despite his local prominence and the renown which extended far beyond our borders Colonel Claghorn never held high civil office.

His name is sought in vain on the lists of Dartmouth or New Bedford selectmen or members of the Legislature. In 1787, when the town of New Bedford was incorporated, he was elected one of the wardens.

OWNED A SHARE IN SCHOOL

Colonel Claghorn's religious affiliations were with the Congregational Church, Rev. Dr. Samuel West, pastor. The meeting house was at the Head-of-the-River, on the Acushnet side, and in 1795 it was decided to build another edifice in Bedford village, the minister to divide his time between the two. The colonel was one of the subscribers to the fund to build this structure, which was erected at the corner of Purchase and William streets, now the site of the Merchants National Bank. About the same time the parishioners desired a school for their children, as the Friends already had one for those of their sect. Hence 40 of the Congregationalists bought a lot on the east side of Purchase street, about 90 feet south of William street and thereon erected a schoolhouse. One of the proprietors was Colonel Claghorn. It is said the learned Dr. West gave this school his careful oversight.

Captain William Claghorn, cousin of George, previously alluded to, likewise was a leading resident of New Bedford. He was a successful shipmaster. During the British raid in 1778 his residence on South Water street, at the head of the present Commercial street, was burned by the invaders. He died of apoplexy while on a visit to Boston in 1793, and was buried in the old Granary Burying Ground there. Tributes to his memory, in verse, were published in the New Bedford and Boston papers at the time. Among Captain Claghorn's descendants are Alfred Claghorn Potter, librarian of the Harvard College Library, and Conrad Aiken, recent winner of the Pulitzer poetry prize. They are respectively son and grandson of Rev. William J. Potter of New Bedford.

BEGINNINGS OF THE NAVY

The year 1794 marked the beginning of the supreme achievement in the career of Colonel George Claghorn, the constructor of the frigate *Constitution* for the first American navy. We may note here how the beginnings of that navy were brought about. The young nation, at

the start, lacked ships of war. For a time it was thought none were necessary, but the depredations of the pirates of Algiers upon American shipping soon proved the contrary. A bill to provide naval armament was passed by Congress in March, 1794. It authorized the construction of six frigates, three of 44 guns and three of 36 guns, at six ports along the coast. While the signing of a treaty with Algiers in 1795 interrupted the building program for a time, the spoliation of our commerce by France during that nation's war with England eventually brought matters to a head. Congress made further appropriations for the completion of ships in the summer of 1797, and the Navy Department was formally established in 1798. Thus, though the keel of the Constitution was laid in 1794 she was not launched until more than three years later.

The naval architect for the new fleet was Joshua Humphreys, who developed some important ideas in his designs. The hull of the Constitution was modelled after the best French practice, but innovations were introduced which eventually caused the Continental governments to abandon old conceptions and construct their vessels on the American pattern. The length of the Constitution over-all was 204 feet, and length on load water line 175 feet; breadth of beam, 46 feet. She was a 44 gun ship, and was commodious enough to carry a crew of officers and men of nearly 500. The great craft was much larger than the British 38-gun frigates, and was equal to a line-of-battle ship. The unusual hardness and weight of her timbers and planking gave her the name of Old Ironsides. Claghorn made her the essentially fighting frigate of the navy, and her name became inseparably associated with feats of daring and seamanship, particularly her great victory over the *Guerriere* in 1812. Her prowess was such as to cause a revolution in naval architecture of the period.

CLAGHORN APPOINTED CONSTRUCTOR

It is not surprising that the great reputation Colonel Claghorn had won as a skilled fabricator of the best ships led to his selection by the government as the constructor of the Constitution. A Mr. Hartley was his assistant. People were not long in finding out that the new frigate under way at Boston was planned to be the pride of the seas, and this caused the keenest interest to be taken in her from the start. All New England must have been impatient that her completion was

so long delayed. The work was carried on at the north end at Boston, near the present Constitution wharf, and the place was named Hartt's Navy Yard. It is interesting to learn that Paul Revere supplied the copper for the hull, and his bill was \$3,820. Payment to Claghorn has not been disclosed, but it must have been a goodly sum. The colonel moved with his family to Boston, where they remained during the progress of the work, but still retained the home here.

GROG WAS DISPENSED

A traditional custom was observed when the masts of the sea-fighter were stepped. To avert dire possibilities of the future, it was necessary, according to maritime superstition, that gold coins should be placed under the foremast, silver under the mainmast, and copper under the mizzen, and this was done, with due ceremony. To give cheer to the occasion a mixture of grog and lemons was placed in tubs about the deck, and ladled out to the participants and workmen in dippers.

During the past summer three new masts were stepped in the rebuilt vessel. Governor Allen was present and placed the coins under the huge sticks in accordance with the ancient custom, but the tubs of liquid refreshments were missing.

Architect Humphreys sent a report of progress to the government in December, 1794, in which he appeared pleased with what Claghorn was accomplishing. By the end of 1795 the frigate was well along towards completion, but work was suspended for the season heretofore mentioned. Eventually the launching was set for Sept. 20, 1797. A few days before that date the ship's cable was carried to the shipyard on the shoulders of 293 men from the ropewalk. It was preceded by Colonel Claghorn, with a fife and drum corps, and three American flags, making quite a pageant, writes Colonel John S. Barrows of Boston, who has made an intensive study of the history of the Constitution.

The New Bedford Medley of Sept. 15 carried the following notice of the event:

"The constructor has the honor to inform his fellow-citizens that the frigate Constitution will be launched into her destined element on Wednesday, the 20th inst. at 11 o'clock.

"GEORGE CLAGHORN."

WARNING TO SPECTATORS

This announcement evidently was copied from the Boston papers. Contractor Claghorn, anticipating that immense crowds would be present on the auspicious occasion, prepared some suggestions for the benefit of the public and issued them in circular form. One of these circulars came into the possession of the Brookline Public Library a few years ago, and has been framed and hung where all may see it. It reads as follows:

"Navy Yard, Boston, Sept. 18, 1797.

"The constructor, having extended to his fellow-citizens all reasonable notification of their laudable curiosity during the progress of the building, believes he may with prosperity make the following requests and suggestions on the operating of the launching of the Constitution.

"That (except the President of the United States, the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and their respective suites, and those specially admitted, who will be comparatively few) no persons will in any way attempt to pass into the navy yard.

"The reason of this request is obviously to prevent interruption or intrusion, which might be injurious or ruinous to the act of launching, under the most favorable conditions, and indispensibly requiring perfect silence and obedience of orders. Independent of this conclusive reason, the dangers of encroaching spectators would be imminent, from the occasional and abrupt falling of bodies used in the construction of the ship, a conformity therefor to this request is earnestly solicited.

"It is suggested that as the tide would be full that it would be necessary to the safety of the spectators, especially 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, discretion of the people ought to amply guard.

"It is regretted in this instance that the yard and the place around it are too contracted for the occasion, and will probably excite too much desire, in which all the citizens have so much interest. It is therefore submitted to those who can conveniently make arrangements to place

themselves in vessels or water crafts at due distances on the profile side of the frigate, but by no means too near, either in a right line or otherwise, as the direction may be uncertain, not to load the boats too deeply, as the agitation of the water line or otherwise, as the direction may be somewhat hazardous.

"It is also recommended that those who erect platforms to accommodate spectators, that they have them also secured in every respect, as the loss of life of a single citizen would mar the satisfaction and pleasure that the constructor would otherwise enjoy of building and constructing for the ocean a powerful agent of national justice, which hope dictates, may become the pride and ornament of the American race.

"GEORGE CLAGHORN."

STUCK ON THE WAYS

Alas, for Constructor Claghorn's high hopes for the launching. The big ship disappointed everybody by sticking on the ways. It appears that two of the naval vessels authorized by Congress had been launched previously, and in the case of the United States, built at Philadelphia, the ways were too steep, with ensuing damage to the craft as she slid off. Claghorn accordingly built his ways less steep, but failed to give them sufficient inclination, with the consequence that the frigate stopped after sliding about 27 feet. Further attempts to get her into the water were futile, so the launching was finally postponed until the next sufficient tide in October. The Boston newspapers generally were sympathetic over the disappointment suffered by Claghorn and the public.

President John Adams came on from Washington a few days prior to Sept. 20, and the occasion must have been almost as great an event for the Bostonian of that day as the recent American Legion affair, with President Hoover's visit. Of Adams one of the papers said that "every house was thronged, every window filled, and every street through which he passed was crowded to observe him in his coach, on his way to partake of a sumptuous dinner at Faneuil Hall." In the evening he attended a theater, where he received another oration. The President and suite were present at the attempted launching, for which an immense crowd gathered, and it was intended to be a gala event.

Indicative of the great popular interest was the plan of the Hay-market theater to portray the launching on the stage on the night of September 20, and despite the mishap at the Navy Yard, the program was given as advertised. A musical piece, called "The Launch, or Huzza for the Constitution," was produced with great success.

On Saturday, Oct. 21, 1797, the Constitution took the water without further accident. A bottle of wine was broken over her bow. It was a cold, cloudy day, yet the attendance of spectators was large. President Adams could not come, but in the distinguished throng were the Duc de Chartres, afterward Louis Phillippe, the Duc de Montpensier, Count de Beaujolais, and Prince Talleyrand.

The New Bedford Medley, under the caption, "Boston News," gave the following brief account of the launching:

"Saturday last, about half past 12 o'clock, the Frigate CONSTITUTION entered her destined element. She had a fine launch, without any accident happening. After which there was a federal discharge of 16 guns."

GLOWING NEWSPAPER ACCOUNTS

Monday following the Boston Commercial Gazette printed its "story."

"THE LAUNCH."

"A Magnificent Spectacle!"

"On Saturday last, at fifteen minutes past 12, the frigate Constitution was launched into the adjacent element, on which she now rides, an elegant and superb specimen of American Naval Architecture, combining the unity of wisdom, strength and beauty.

"The tide being amply full, she descended into the bosom of the ocean with an ease and dignity, which while it afforded the most exalted and heart felt pleasure and satisfaction to the many thousand spectators was the guarantee of the safety, and the pledge that no occurrence should mar the joyous sensations that every one experienced,

and which burst forth in reiterated shouts which rent the weklin. On a signal being given from on board, her ordinance on shore announced to the neighboring county that the CONSTITUTION WAS SECURE.

"Too much praise cannot be given to Colonel Claghorn for the coolness and regularity displayed in the whole business of the launch; and the universal congratulations he received were evidence of the public estimate of his skill, intelligence, and circumspection."

Hollis, in his history of the Constitution, makes no reference to the Commercial Gazette's account. He does say that "a newspaper man was present, and gave a very graphic account of the launch before 'a numerous and brilliant collection of citizens.' They had begun to assemble at daylight on the firing of a gun, which was the signal agreed upon to indicate that all was propitious, and 'at fifteen minutes after 12, at the first stroke at the spur-shores, she commenced a movement into the water with such steadiness, majesty and exactness as to fill almost every breast with sensations of joy and delight.'"

It appears the account cited was from the Columbian Centinel. Another "write-up," in the Boston Chronicle, was very flowery. It spoke of the ship moving "with a most graceful dignity into the embraces of the surrounding waters. With gentle motions and a modest decency she soon disencumbered herself of her swaddling clothes, and seemed to smile with a pleasing complacency on the brilliant assembly who attended the ceremony of her nativity."

CLAGHORN SELLS HIS HOME HERE

It is not the purpose of this article to follow the story of the Constitution further, Claghorn, celebrated throughout the nation, returned to his old home in New Bedford. An inference has been given up that he did not bear his honors modestly. Eventually he sold his property on North Second and North streets, and also a cedar swamp which he owned. In the deed of Nov. 19, 1804, George Claghorn, gentleman, as he described himself, and his wife, Deborah, for the consideration of \$3650 paid by Jethro Daggett of Swansea, disposed of the North Second street land, the house and shipyard, and also threw in an undivided fortieth share of a schoolhouse and lot, "called the Purchase Street School." Subsequently an addition was built to the little homestead, which in 1840 was owned by Andrew Robeson. The old

dwelling was burned in the great fire of 1859, which ravaged that section of the city.

Colonel Claghorn and his family removed to a farm in Seekonk, where he lived for nearly twenty years until his death, Feb. 3, 1824, in his 76th year. He had seen fulfilled the hope expressed in his utterance of 1797 that the Constitution would "become the pride and ornament of the American race," or as perhaps might be better said, of the American Navy. Yet this may not have been a solace to him in his obscure old age, to judge from an inkling afforded by Governor Henry H. Crapo, who tersely wrote a few years after Claghorn's death, "Building the Constitution Spoiled Him."