

Symbolic Sailing
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The USS *Constitution* has been called a national symbol. She was one of the first six ships commissioned by George Washington in 1794. “Old Ironsides” went undefeated in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 and supported Marines when they went “to the shores of Tripoli.”

But the crew, both past and present, represent something even more essentially American. “Many people don’t know it, but from the beginning it was a diverse crew,” said USS *Constitution* Captain of the Deck Joseph Wilson, who is of African heritage. “There were African Americans — not slaves — sailors, able-bodied seamen.... The major difference now is that the sailors are both male and female.”

Wilson has tremendous admiration for the original crew. “Those were iron men on a wooden ship,” he said. “They had Einstein’s intellect. We had a tugboat tow us out of the harbor. Those guys sailed right from the pier!”

Wilson’s admiration comes from firsthand experience in sailing a ship that originally called for a crew of 450. Since the *Constitution* sailed with only six of its 36 sails — for the first time in 116 years — on July 21, the crew was reduced to around 140 enlisted Navy personnel, civilians, reservists and one Coast Guard representative.

But that doesn’t mean it was an easy job. They climbed up rigging so high that it turned grown people into “kids learning to walk again,” Wilson said. They hoisted a 1,020-pound main topsail that’s about the size of a regulation basketball court and five other smaller sails that totaled 2,330 pounds.

“It takes a lot of teamwork and physical strength to get those sails up,” said Chief Wilson, who was assigned to the USS *Constitution* three years ago as a sailing rookie. The crew’s mission began with sailing theory in a classroom and progressed to the *Eagle*, a Coast Guard sailing vessel used to train cadets. The final, most important step, said Wilson, was sailing the HMS *Bounty*, a replica of the original ship of *Mutiny on the Bounty* fame. “That’s when I said, ‘I can do this,’” he said. Even so, that ship’s largest sail is smaller than the smallest one on the USS *Constitution*.

Wilson was greatly touched by the outpouring of emotion that surrounded the USS *Constitution*’s sailing, which some 100,000 people on land and sea witnessed. He called it “a very special and spiritual experience.”

“It brought America together again. I was looking at the crowd as we drew in the lines,” he said. “They were all smiling, some were fighting back tears. All skin colors, ethnic backgrounds and genders were out the door. It was all about America — pulling together for one common cause.”

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