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Sponsors

Introduction from [Ships of the United States Navy and their Sponsors, 1913—1923](#)

by Anne Martin Hall and Edith Wallace Benham.

BESTOWING THE NAME

THE launching of a Navy ship is an engineering feat of great magnitude, usually so successfully performed that the spectator thrills with enthusiasm entirely devoid of anxiety. Each succeeding battleship becomes larger and heavier, and careful calculation must be worked out bearing directly upon the launching even before a single rivet has been driven.

It is the usual custom in launching naval vessels to send them into the water stern first, the fuller form of the hull aft tending to make the vessel rise more quickly from her first plunge than would be the case were she sent into the water bow first, and it also makes the pivotal strain less at that instant when the bow on entering the water and the stern upon rising throw the burden of weight upon the forward poppets or timber shores. In the earlier years of our Navy the name of a United States Navy ship was usually bestowed by an officer of the Navy. The naming party went on board to be launched with the ship, and the sponsor broke a bottle of wine or water over the bow of the vessel and pronounced the name at the moment that the bow struck the water.

The ceremony of bestowing the name upon a United States Navy ship has always been a civil ceremony and without intent of religious significance. Examined records give only one instance of religious ceremony in connection with the launch of a United States Navy ship prior to 1914. Prayer, offered by a clergyman, preceded the civil ceremony of launching and naming "[Princeton \(Ist\)](#)" in 1843.

Just before the vessel was released Captain Stockton, U. S. Navy, who was in charge, assembled those on board and a prayer was offered by the Reverend Doctor Suddards:

"Eternal God, Creator of the Universe, Governor of Nations. Humbly we prostrate ourselves before Thee and ask Thy blessing. Most humbly we beseech Thee with Thy favor to behold and bless Thy servant the President of the United States and all the officers of the Government. May the vessel about to be launched be guarded by Thy gracious Providence and care. May it not bear the sword in vain, but as the minister of God be a terror to those who do evil and a defense to those who do well. Graciously bless its officers and men. May love of country be engraven upon their hearts. Remember in mercy both arms of our National defense, and may virtue, honor and religion pervade all their ranks. Bless all nations and individuals on the earth and hasten the time when the benefits of holy religion shall have so prevailed that none shall wage war again for the purpose of aggression and none shall need it as a means of defense. All of which blessings we ask in the name of Him who taught us to say: 'Our Father who art in Heaven' . . ."
— (U. S. Gazette)

In 1914 the custom of prayer at launchings of our battleships was established through the efforts of the Society of Sponsors. A copy of the historic prayer offered in 1843 was forwarded to the Secretary of the Navy with a petition that an adapted form of the prayer be offered at launchings of our Navy battleships. Army and Navy Journal:

"At the launching of the battleship [Oklahoma](#) at Camden, N. J., on 23 March 1914, there was observed the custom which has always prevailed in other Christian countries of prayer preceding the civil ceremony of naming a battleship. This suggestion, made by Mrs. Reynold T. Hall, president of the Society of Sponsors, was most enthusiastically received by the Oklahoma delegation to the launching, and Bishop Hoss, of Oklahoma, was invited to offer the invocation. Prior to this occasion the United States had launched its battleships with civil ceremony only. In other

countries this religious custom is always observed, and in England the special prayer at launchings is one of great beauty. This suggestion made by the Society of Sponsors was highly commended by the Secretary of the Navy and by the Oklahoma state officials. Secretary Daniels is so favorably impressed with the idea, that hereafter a prayer will be part of the exercises of launching a battleship.”

The prayer used at the launching of British battleships was prepared by the Archbishop of Canterbury for the launching of H. M. S. “*Alexandra*” in 1875. An admiralty circular gives the form of service to be observed at launchings and the prayer. The service commences with the 107th psalm, beginning with verse twenty-three: “*They that go down to the sea in ships . . .*” The prayer follows:

“O Thou that sitteth above the water-floods and stilleth the raging of the sea, accept, we beseech Thee, the supplication of Thy servants for all who in this ship now and hereafter shall commit their lives unto the perils of the deep. In all their ways enable them truly and godly to serve Thee, and by their Christian lives, to set forth Thy glory throughout the earth. Watch over them in their going forth and in their coming in that no evil befall them nor mischief come nigh to hurt their souls, and so through all the changes and chances of this mortal life bring them of Thy mercy to the sure haven of Thine everlasting kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” The Lord’s Prayer concludes the ceremonial.

Early records of naming ceremonies are not complete owing to destruction of old records, and lack of newspaper space or enterprise, for the records discovered show that Navy launchings were occasions of great public interest and enthusiasm, and were attended by large numbers of people. Many prominent officials were present and were launched with the ship. Commodore John Paul Jones was aboard the “[America](#),” the first ship of the line launched in America, and in several instances the Secretary of the Navy has been launched with a Navy ship. The “*America*” built in 1782, was presented to the French Government.

The first record of a United States Navy naming or “*christening*” is that of the “[Constitution](#),” 20 October 1797, on which occasion Captain James Sever, U. S. Navy, “*broke a bottle of wine over the bow of the frigate.*” When the frigate “[Independence](#)” was launched, 20 June 1814, “*an officer of the Constitution (Commodore Bainbridge) had the honor of christening her as she struck the water.*” The frigate “[Brandywine](#),” in 1825, “*smote the water in fine style and Captain Dove stationed on her bow christened her with the usual ceremony.*”

In 1828 the first woman sponsor appears in print, but her identity may be forever shrouded in the mystery of the words: “*The [Concord](#) glided beautifully into her destined element and was christened by a young lady of Portsmouth.*” (*Preble’s History of the Portsmouth Navy Yard.*) In those days it was not the fashion to put the names of ladies in the papers.

From that date up to the present time examined records give the names of few men who have participated in the naming of United States Navy ships. The ships were: the “[Pennsylvania](#)” in 1837; the “[Dale](#)” in 1839; the “*Princeton (Ist)*” and the frigate <https://www.navsource.org/archives/09/86/86628.htm> “*Raritan*” in 1843; the “[San Jacinto](#)” and “[Susquehanna](#)” in 1850; the “[New Ironsides](#)” in 1862; the “[Miantonomah](#)” in 1863; the “*Quinnebaug*” in 1866; the “[Mackenzie](#)” in 1901.

A bottle of wine has been broken upon the bow of the majority of our Navy vessels at the time of naming. Some vessels have been sprinkled with water, the bottle of water usually having been brought from the river for which the ship was named, or from a spring in the state or near the city for which the ship was named. In a few instances two bottles have been broken — one of wine, the other water.

There have been a few unique exceptions. A bottle of American whiskey was broken over the bow of “*Princeton (Ist)*” and over the frigate “*Raritan*” in 1843; and a bottle of brandy upon “*San Jacinto*” in 1850, and “*New Ironsides*” in 1862, by the Naval officers who bestowed the names, — probably to stimulate their good luck as strongly as possible. A fair young woman sponsor broke a bottle of pure Irish whiskey over the bow of the “[Shamrock](#)” in 1863, bestowing the name. The “[Germantown](#)” and the “[Pawtuxet](#)” were sprinkled with wine and water commingled at the time of naming.

At several of our Navy launchings, according to a Japanese custom, three doves or carrier pigeons have been let loose at the moment of launching, with red, white and blue ribbons attached to their necks. In Japan doves were originally

believed to be messengers of Hachiman, the patron god of the warriors, and their use at launchings of their warships meant wishing success in arms.

Some Navy ships have been launched without ceremony of any kind, notably the "[Monitor](#)" and the "[Boston](#)," and many of the submarine chasers launched during the World War.

Of late years it has become the custom for the launching party to stand upon a platform beside the ship's stem, and at the instant that the vessel starts to move toward the water the sponsor breaks a bottle of champagne against the bow and pronouncing the name of the ship says: "*I name thee in the name of the United States.*"

NOMINATING THE SPONSOR

In the old Navy it was the custom for Navy Yard officials to invite a sponsor to break the bottle of wine or water and bestow the name upon the vessel. Sometimes contestants for the honor were allowed to draw lots. Of late years it has been the custom for the Navy Department to request the Governor of the State to nominate a sponsor for the vessel to be named for a State; or the Mayor or Council of a City to nominate a sponsor for the vessel to be named for a city. When vessels are named for individuals it is customary for the Navy Department to nominate as sponsor some member of the family of the officer, enlisted man, or distinguished civilian for whom the vessel is named. If no member of the family is available, the Navy Department or the officials of the Shipbuilding Company designate a sponsor. Image and text provided by Rutgers University Libraries.

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[Back To The Main Photo Index](#)

[Back To The Battleship Photo Index Page](#)

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