

Scholars' Site Visit Report; May 23, 2012

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The Charlestown Navy Yard: Anchor of the Boston National Historical Park

The core questions posed to the scholars taking part in the May 15-16, 2012 visit to the Charlestown Navy Yard (CNY) reflect the ambivalence expressed by some observers toward the institution's place in Boston's history. An opening statement suggests that the CNY "represents a very different resource and experience in terms of its historic period and its scale."¹ Should the CNY be considered as a separate entity from USS *Constitution* and USS *Cassin Young* and treated accordingly or not? Should one or all be integrated into Boston's Freedom Trail and African American National Historical Site (AANHS)? Professor Don Hickey, reporting on a previous scholar's visit, concludes that with regard to the Boston National Historical Park (BNHP) the CNY is an "anomaly."² Moreover, the professor and a few other observers recommend treating CNY's history only through the War of 1812. The CNY's Historic Resource Study provided to the current visiting scholars suggests *Constitution* and *Cassin Young* are "not integral elements of the shipyard" and are significant only because of their *operational* [italics added for emphasis] history."³

I feel strongly and will elaborate below that the historical experience of the Charlestown Navy Yard, USS *Constitution*, and USS *Cassin Young* can be and should be considered integral to the Boston National Historical Park. Previous visiting scholars zeroed in on three themes that predominate on the Freedom Trail and AANHS: 1) the fight for freedom; 2) building the new nation; and 3) the upward mobility of people of all races, genders, classes, ethnicities, etc. These

¹ BNHP Scholars Site Visit II-May 15 to May 16, 2012: Core Questions

² Don Hickey, "Report on the National Park Service's Interpretation of Historic Sites in Boston, p.1

³ Stephen P. Carlson, "Charlestown Navy Yard Historic Resource Study," BNHP, NPS, 2010, p.360.

same themes can be directly related to the historical experience of the CNY, *Constitution*, and *Cassin Young*.⁴

The Fight for Freedom: In the report of her previous site visit to Boston, Professor Charlene Mires aptly concluded that “Freedom . . . is Boston’s brand.”⁵ Both the Freedom Trail and the AANHS detail the struggle by white and black Americans within the context of the American Revolution. This story can be continued at CNY through the 19th, 20th, and even 21st centuries. The core mission of CNY was to build and repair warships for the U.S. Navy whose central mission was and is to protect our freedom and help other peoples defend or achieve theirs. *Constitution* and other naval vessels built at CNY or operating from that base fought the Barbary corsairs to win the freedom of American merchant ships and seamen taken captive and fought Great Britain in 1812 partly over the impressment of American Sailors and the concept of “freedom of the seas.” USS *Hartford* (built at CNY), flagship of Admiral David G. Farragut at the battles of New Orleans and Mobile Bay, and the U.S. Navy fought the Civil War in large part to end the denial of freedom to Black Americans. CNY built and repaired thousands of naval vessels similar to *Cassin Young* in the fight to defend freedom in two world wars and the Cold War.

In contrast to the Freedom Trail and AANHS, there is little evidence in the current CNY historical presentations of how African Americans fought for and eventually achieved their freedom. The National Park Service (NPS) and the other entities at CNY, however, have a great opportunity, in keeping with the NPS emphasis on Scholarship and Diversity, to continue the story through to the present. For much of the Navy’s history, black Americans constituted 10 to

⁴ One obvious measure to enhance the connection between the sites in Boston and the CNY is to give much greater attention through waysides and virtual information on the sites where British troops landed en route to Bunker Hill, the last stop on the Freedom Trail. Visitors can easily miss the current sparse and badly placed building-side plaques.

⁵ Charlene Mires, “Scholar’s Site Visit Report, BNHP, June 20-22, 2011, p.2.

25 percent of the armed service. As one example, when HMS *Leopard* stopped and subdued USS *Chesapeake* in 1807, the British warship impressed four U.S. seamen, including Daniel Martin, an African American from Westport, Massachusetts.⁶ In the 1850s *Constitution* served as the flagship of the African Squadron whose mission was to end the traffic in African slaves. Boston, the heart of abolitionist sentiment before and during the Civil War, raised the 54th Massachusetts Regiment and other African American units, many of which deployed on Navy ships to the southern battlefields from the CNY. Destroyer escort USS *Mason*, built at CNY, was the first and one of only two Navy ships in World War II crewed predominantly by African American Sailors.⁷

Building the New Nation: The Freedom Trail and related sites in Boston proper admirably tell the story of the evolution of America's unique political, economic, and cultural development before and during the Revolution. This was the birth of a new, in many ways unique nation. But the CNY and the Navy's connection to the yard present another great opportunity to relate how that young nation grew, matured, and spread its influence around the globe in succeeding centuries. The CNY served as one of America's gateways to the world. Merchant ships operating from Boston, Salem, and other New England ports and bound for China, India, and Europe sailed under the protection of Navy warships based at CNY. The Peabody-Essex Museum provides ample evidence of this synergy. *Constitution's* wartime exploits are well known and rightfully emphasized but the proud warship also has a story to tell

⁶ Barnard C. Nalty, "Long Passage to Korea: Black Sailors and the Integration of the U.S. Navy," in Edward J. Marolda, ed. *The U.S. Navy in the Korean War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007), p.244.

⁷ Mary Pat Kelly, *Proudly We Served: The Men of the USS Mason* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995); See <http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/m6/mason-ii.htm>

of her service as flagship of the Mediterranean and Pacific squadrons; of her 1844-1846 circumnavigation of the globe under colorful Captain “Mad Jack” Percival.⁸

The CNY is relevant to the building of a new nation with regard to technology and the industrial process. CNY was a pioneer in the design, testing, and employment of machinery and support facilities that helped the Navy become the world’s dominant sea power. Joshua Humphreys and other naval architects designed *Constitution* and other frigates whose speed, hull strength, and firepower earned the respect of friend and foe alike. CNY’s Dry Dock No. 1, still in operation today, provided a revolutionary approach to American ship building and repair when constructed in the early 19th century. CNY was in the forefront of American industrial complexes that developed steam-powered ships, USS *Merrimack* and other warships with screw propellers, and ironclad monitors. CNY became known throughout the nation as one of the preeminent facilities for the production of different types of rope, die-lock chain, sonars, radars, missiles, and other naval equipment . Destroyers, destroyer escorts, and amphibious ships built at CNY were instrumental in U.S. success at sea in World War I, World War II, and the early Cold War. *Cassin Young* is a dramatic and fitting symbol of the CNY’s mission during the latter years of its existence. Legions of potential visitors to CNY, many having served in destroyers like *Cassin Young* since World War II, will be eager to board the ship and learn about how her Sailors lived and fought and how her weapons and machinery operated.⁹ I agree with the Historic Resource Study’s call for more attention to *Cassin Young*’s role during the Cold War , “the period which the physical fabric of the ship represents and the period where it has a close

⁸ See <http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/c13/constitution.htm> ; Charles E. Brodine et al, *Interpreting Old Ironsides: An Illustrated Guide to USS Constitution* (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 2007).

⁹ See http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/c4/cassin_young.htm

association with the Navy Yard's primary mission of modernizing and overhauling naval vessels.”¹⁰

Upward Mobility of People: A fact of life with regard to museum exhibition and historical writing is that people yearn to learn about other people. Stories of how people rise to a challenge or display venality and cowardice in times of crisis, achieve great success in their profession, perfect an art form, or simply live ordinary lives peak our interest. People stories bring to life what otherwise would be mundane descriptions of buildings, ships, machinery, and other inanimate objects. Visitors to the Freedom Trail and other Boston historical sites expect to see and do see the stories of Paul Revere, Abigail Adams, and other nationally recognized figures but also learn about less well known but equally important black poet Phyllis Wheatley and shoemaker George Hewes.

The NPS can enhance understanding of the CNY's importance to American history by highlighting the stories of those relatively well known men and women who lived and worked within its walls. Many visitors may be surprised but pleased to learn that Stephen Decatur, David Dixon Porter, Alfred Thayer Mahan, George Dewey, Loamm Baldwin, and other giants of U.S. history served in various capacities at CNY.¹¹

¹⁰ Carlson, CNY Historic Resource Study, p. 7.

¹¹ Joseph J. Thomas, ed. *Leadership Embodied: The Secrets to Success of the Most Effective Navy and Marine Corps Leaders* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press/Naval Historical Center, 2005); Long, David F. *Ready to Hazard: A Biography of Commodore William Bainbridge, 1774-1843* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England; distributed by University Microfilms International, 1981); Lewis, Charles L. *The Romantic Decatur* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1937); Grant, Bruce. *Isaac Hull, Captain of Old Ironsides*. Chicago: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1947); Maloney, Linda M. *The Captain from Connecticut: The Life and Naval Times of Isaac Hull*. Boston: Northeastern Univ. Press, 1986); Bradford, James C., ed. *Admirals of the New Steel Navy: Makers of the American Naval Tradition, 1880-1930* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1990); James C. Bradford, ed., *Captains of the Old Steam Navy: Makers of the American Naval Tradition, 1840-1880* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986); James C. Bradford, ed. *Command Under Sail: Makers of the American Naval Tradition, 1775-1850* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1985).

They can also learn about the experiences of ordinary Sailors and Marines, shipbuilders, machinists, rope-makers, and household servants. I agree fully with Seth Bruggeman, a previous visiting scholar, who observed “where better than the Charlestown Navy Yard to explore cross-generational struggles for a better livelihood?”¹² Indeed, while the CNY Visitors Center exhibition, the orientation film, and the NPS booklet *Charleston Navy Yard* highlight a few individual workers and the World War II workforce in general, there is much more that can be done to bring to life to the experiences CNY employees and Sailors who toiled there from 1800 to the present.

As Professor Bruggeman aptly observes, visitors to the yard for the next 30 years will be “more ethnically diverse, more frequently female.”¹³ Current references to African Americans at the CNY are few and far between, an anomaly given the strong focus on black Americans in the Boston proper segment of the BNHP. NPS materials do highlight the role of women workers in World War II but the visitors need to learn about their experiences throughout the yard’s history and that of WAVES and other Navy women past and present. Having authored a history of the Washington Navy Yard¹⁴ and served as an historical consultant to the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation’s museum (officially but incongruously titled *Bldg 92: Brooklyn Navy Yard Center*. See <http://bldg92.org>), I offer several approaches to covering civilian and military personnel who worked at CNY. John Sharp, a retired human resources officer of Naval District Washington, has done yeoman volunteer work researching and writing on employees of the Washington Navy Yard. See http://www.history.navy.mil/books/sharp/WNY_History.pdf He

¹² Seth Bruggman, “Toward a History of Toeing the Line in Boston National Historical Park,” BNHP Scholars Visit, June 20-22, 2011, p.10.

¹³ Ibid., p.1, FN1.

¹⁴ Edward J. Marolda, *The Washington Navy Yard: An Illustrated History* (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1999).

has documented the role of black and female employees during the first half of the 19th century. Brooklyn historical coordinators, led by the development corporation's Daniella Romano, have developed strong ties to local historical societies, cultural centers, museums, oral history repositories, warship veterans' associations, libraries, universities, and citizens groups to collect data on deceased former workers and to interview retired personnel. See

<http://bldg92.org/support-bldg-92/community-partners>

Bostonians and Boston's commercial interests, intimately familiar with the historic sites in their midst, are rightly proud of and strongly support their Freedom Trail. The citizens of Charlestown, many of whom worked at the navy yard, can also become champions for greater recognition of the navy yard as a national and local treasure. Much more can be done to highlight the history of the yard's connection to Charlestown, such as its sponsorship of sports teams, Sea Scouts, and boat excursions; help in firefighting and disaster relief; wartime bond drives, patriotic rallies, and visits by state dignitaries; and on the less rosy but relevant side racial, labor, political, and anti-war disturbances; the influence of politics on hiring/firing, etc. As one anecdote, in 1844 CNY Marines helped quell a riot at the Massachusetts State Prison. Local residents who associate the history of their town and its citizens with CNY will become boosters.

Recommendations:

- 1) As detailed above, ensure visitors consider the CNY as integral to their Boston experience by emphasizing the themes: The Fight for Freedom, Building the New Nation, and the Upward Mobility of People.
- 2) Improve recognition of the Charlestown Navy Yard as a national, regional, and local treasure in its own right and not merely as the location of USS *Constitution*. This goal

can be accomplished by focusing attention on the historic attributes of CNY through *virtual and physical means*.

Virtual means: With only a few physical structures still remaining and/or accessible to the public, it is imperative that the NPS relate CNY's 212-year history through web-based and other electronic media. Indeed, this method of communication provides numerous opportunities for putting CNY's experience in national, regional, and local historical context; stimulating visitors to explore not only the NPS area but also the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) area; disseminating information on bus, bike, and walking tours; and complementing and elaborating on information (additional sources, internet links, etc.) presented in waysides and other physical markers; connecting Charlestown citizens with the navy yard in their midst through public programs, streaming videos of interviews with former CNY workers; and identification of local organizations working to preserve the navy yard's history. As one example, the Navy Department Library of the Naval History and Heritage Command provides virtual visitors with useful historical and other information on the Washington Navy Yard. See <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq52-1.htm> In that regard, the NPS website for CNY should contain digitized copies of relevant photographs and the *Boston Naval Shipyard News*, an invaluable source for information on the work force and life at the facility.

Physical means: Examples of CNY's rich past abound throughout the NPS and BRA areas of the navy yard but visitors find them either poorly identified or unidentified (ie, Muster House, Dry Dock No. 2, etc.). The key to reversing this situation in the BRA area is for NPS to establish and nurture close working relations with representatives of the BRA. A compelling argument can be made to BRA that improving historical recognition of the former CNY buildings now housing residents, restaurants, and other private entities will please the owners

and enhance the commercial value of these properties. Historically attuned residents can become avid supporters for preserving CNY's history. This goal can be accomplished through the relatively low-cost provision, perhaps with BRA financial support, of individual building plaques, waysides incorporating text and visuals, and outdoor displays of CNY products and machinery.

Improving the relationship between NPS and BRA is also important because it can facilitate public recognition of the CNY's consequential post-industrial, and post-disestablishment history; the BRA area is not a dead zone of old decrepit, vacant factory buildings but a vibrant section of the "new Charlestown" replete with residences and thriving commercial concerns. This makes the BRA area just as inviting to visitors to CNY as does the NPS area with its hustle and bustle of current Navy operations relating to USS *Constitution*.

Development of former segments of the Brooklyn Navy Yard and the Washington Navy Yard provide examples of successful public/private interface. Recognizing that the unique history of the navy yard enhanced the commercial value of the site to the 300 enterprises operating there, the Brooklyn Navy Yard Development Corporation led the charge to leverage financial support from the City of New York in construction of the museum/education center at Bldg. 92. A commercial consortium has transformed the former Washington Navy Yard Annex into a booming waterfront site called The Yards replete with residences, offices, restaurants, and shops. Virtual and other media connect the current development to the site's Navy and industrial history, for instance describing and picturing the boilermaker, pattern and joiner, lumber shed, and other buildings of the former navy yard facility. See

http://www.dcyards.com/about_the_yards/history

Another public/private success story is cooperation between the Navy/Marine Corps and Washington D.C.'s Barracks Row Main Street, the latter chartered by the National Trust for Historic Preservation to use preservation strategies for revitalizing commercial areas. Waysides and external building murals vetted by official military historians now grace 8th Street SE ("Barracks Row") and intellectually connect the Washington Navy Yard, the Marine Corps' 8th and I Barracks, the Marine Commandant's Residence, the old naval hospital, and a Capitol Hill neighborhood that was home to generations of navy yard workers. See

<http://barracksrow.org/what/about>

The two buildings and their internal machinery within the BRA area most important to the CNY story are the Rope Walk and Chain Forge. From the tour by the visiting scholars it is clear that despite the great historical value of these sites both structures are in such disrepair that it may be impractical and prohibitively expensive to restore them for safe visitation. It is imperative that NPS and BRA find common ground regarding a go-ahead. With regard to the Rope Walk, a solution may be to retain reasonable space in the building devoted to an NPS display of rope-making machinery and historical interpretation and allow BRA to commercially develop the rest of the building. The massive hammers in the Chain Forge, in the view of this observer, are more important to CNY's industrial story than the building itself. An agreement with BRA to display at least one of the hammers elsewhere in their area, perhaps outdoors, in exchange for demolition of the building may be a reasonable solution. Residents in the BRA area may be expected to support such actions to eliminate environmental hazards and visual blight from their neighborhood.

NPS, with BRA concurrence, should develop a tour route not unlike the Freedom Trail that will facilitate the visitor experience. Bus, bike, and walking tours following such a route are

reasonable approaches and have proven especially popular at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Visitors are particularly impressed with Brooklyn's Dry Dock No. 1, shipyard cranes, Admiral's Row, and the old naval hospital buildings and grounds. <http://nymag.com/bestofny/fun/2012/tour> Similar tours occur at the Washington Navy Yard.

Despite NPS control of the CNY adjacent to *Constitution*, *Cassin Young*, and the Constitution Museum, this area needs almost as much attention as the BRA area. I consider it vital to recognition of the CNY as a location of historical importance that the entrance area be redesigned. Currently the NPS's CNY sign is dwarfed by the word Constitution in large, metallic letters. The building labeled Gate 1 lacks any aesthetic attributes and resembles every other drab bus stop shelter. I recommend replacement of this structure with a representation of the original CNY gateway arch along with appropriate text and visuals and a site/tour map that will excite visitors and stimulate them to learn more about the rich heritage of the CNY as well as *Constitution*, the Constitution Museum, and *Cassin Young*. A positive impression of CNY facilitated by the entrance display should be reinforced by the visitor's next stop, the Visitors Center. Both the center's orientation video and the historical exhibition are well done but unfortunately reflect what I consider the current narrow focus on the industrial and technological aspects of CNY's history. I recommend a new approach that incorporates the Fight for Freedom, Building a New Nation, and the Upward Mobility of People themes detailed above.

Many visitors will then proceed to *Constitution*, the Constitution Museum, or *Cassin Young*. There is no incentive or guidance to consider another route and explore the buildings historically significant to CNY: the Officers' Quarters, the Commandant's House, and the Marine Barracks. Indeed, the large, unattractive tennis court physically separates these structures from the waterfront sites and serves to dissuade visitors from approaching the former.

I recommend replacement of the tennis court with a park-like setting affording shade, drinking water fountains, and a comfortable place for visitors to sit after trekking the Freedom Trail.

There are no comparable amenities in the open, railroad-track crisscrossed space fronting the ships and the museum. The park-like setting would also be an excellent venue for NPS to provide visitors, as they recover their strength, with waysides and other guides directing them to sites both in the NPS area and the BRA area.

At present the visitor finds little information on the historical importance of the Officers' Quarters, the Commandant's House, or the Marine Barracks and more importantly, the people who lived and worked there. In line with my comments above regarding greater emphasis on people, I recommend the installation of waysides incorporating comprehensive information on the naval officers, wives, and servants who inhabited these dwellings. Visitors can learn not only about the battle exploits of William Bainbridge, Isaac Hull, and other commandants but also their stewardship of CNY. The same applies to famous Americans such as George Dewey and Alfred Thayer Mahan who later earned fame on the national level but also served as junior officers at CNY. A concerted research effort can also identify the children of these officers who might have attained fame in later life and the names and stories of maids, gardeners, and other servants. Complementing this information should be descriptions of the unique architectural, design, and construction aspects of these 19th century buildings.

In conclusion, the Charlestown Navy Yard, witness to more than two centuries of consequential American development, is one of the country's most priceless historical gems on a par with USS *Constitution* and the sites along Boston's Freedom Trail. The NPS and its Charlestown Navy Yard partners face a worthy challenge to bring this significant place and the people who worked there to the attention of millions of future visitors to the BNHP.