The U.S.S. Constitution weighs 2,400 tons, is 204 feet long, and has a mast 220 feet high. She is probably the only ship ever saved by a poem.

The biggest ships in the wooden sailing navies were ships of the line. Some carried as many as 100 cannon. Their crews were huge—sometimes as many as 700 men—and they were expensive to maintain. The young United States had no ships of the line. Frigates were smaller and more versatile, but they were still big ships. They carried 28 to 44 guns and crews of 300 to 550 men. When the Constitution was launched, it was the world’s largest frigate. These powerful ships were designed to be weapons of destruction.

Sailing ships use wind for power. No wind, no power. Picture a fleet of full-rigged British naval vessels with no breeze in the air. They’re stuck. Becalmed is the nautical word for it. That was the situation at the mouth of New York Harbor on July 17, 1812. The U.S.S. Constitution was surrounded by a British fleet. That handsome American ship—one of six frigates ordered when George Washington was president—was a sitting duck. As soon as the air stirred, it looked as if she would be blown from the water.

What would you do? The Americans kedge.

That means they put a light anchor from the ship into a rowboat, rowed ahead, and dropped that anchor (called a “kedge”). Sailors on board the Constitution then pulled on the rope until they reached the anchor. Then they kedged again. And again. And again. After three exhausting days, they’d covered a distance. So, when a breeze finally came, they were able to escape their enemy.

That was just one of the exploits that made the Constitution special. A month later, in that same War of 1812, the Constitution took on the British frigate H.M.S. Guerrière and, in a famous battle, destroyed her. Cannonballs from the Guerrière kept bouncing off the sides of the Constitution. “Huzza! Her sides are made of iron!” shouted a sailor who was there. And so, after that, she was often called “Old Ironsides.”
The ship was actually made of wood, with thin copper sheathing to keep ship's worms away. But it was no accident that she withstood cannon fire: she was a symbol of the best of American craftsmanship. She'd been built at Edmund Hartt's shipyard in Boston. Each of her sister ships—the Chesapeake, Congress, Constellation, President, and United States—was built at a different American shipyard, from Norfolk, Virginia, to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. They all followed the exact specifications of a Philadelphia man, Joshua Humphrey, who had designed the bigger-than-usual frigates.

The Constitution's hull was 25 inches thick, with live oak at its center. Live oak, which grows in coastal areas of the South (like where I live in Virginia), is said to be the toughest wood in the world. Humphrey had ordered "the best white oak" for the keel (the ship's backbone), and "the best Carolina pitch pine" for the decks. Her giant masts (from which the sails hung) were made from towering New Hampshire pines. The 36 sails were sewn from canvas woven in Rhode Island. Boston's Paul Revere bid to supply the copper bolts that held the ship together. He said he could do it "as cheap as anyone and as well." He was right. He got paid $3,820.33 for 15 tons of copper fittings and a ship's bell.

You can probably guess what U.S.S. stands for. What about H.M.S.? The S is easy—but H.M. is connected to who the ship is fighting for. Officially, it's not Britain—it's His Majesty (though for the second half of the 20th century it's been Her Majesty.)

This late 19th-century painting doesn't show the ship quite accurately, but it's the only image ever made of the Constitution's launch in 1797.
In 1812, the British royal navy had 1,017 warships. The U.S. Navy had 18.

The Constitution usually carried 54 cannons. In 1797 she had a crew of 450, including 55 marines and 30 boys. Today, as a museum ship, she has a crew of 60. Her career as a warship lasted 84 years. The ship survived 42 battles, destroyed or captured 32 ships, and was never defeated. No enemy shot ever pierced Constitution’s sides; the only enemy troops ever on board were prisoners.

A few months after the encounter with the Guerrière, the Constitution whipped H.M.S. Java, even though the Constitution had lost its steering wheel and was hardly able to maneuver. The British Admiralty (the head naval office) issued an order to British ships. They were not to get involved with the Americans one to one; they had to outnumber them in order to engage them in battle.

The U.S.S. Constitution was famous even before the War of 1812. She was part of the official birth of the U.S. Navy. That was in 1794, when President Washington ordered those six cannon-toting frigates. At that time, the new nation had no navy. The colonies had put one together during the War of Independence—it was made up of merchant ships and fishing schooners (some 2,000 privateers), along with a few warships and a small fleet that Ben Franklin bought in France. (Read about John Paul Jones for more about the Revolutionary War navy.) Great Britain was the world’s big naval giant. But America’s scrappy and surprising sailors had played a decisive role in that fight for freedom.

After the war, the navy was abandoned. When Americans went to sea—and lots did—it was to trade. Our merchant ships were soon plying the Mediterranean. For centuries, the North African states had demanded bribe money from anyone who wanted to sail that sea. (Then called the Barbary States, they are today’s Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco.) Barbary pirates—called “corsairs”—made things unpleasant for anyone who wouldn’t pay up.

**Old Ironsides**

Here are some verses from the poem that Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in 1830.

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see
That banner in the sky:
Beneath it rung the battle shout,
And burst the cannon’s roar;
—
The meteor of the ocean air
Shall sweep the clouds no more!

Her deck, once red with heroes’ blood,
Where knelt the vanquished foe,
When winds were hurrying o’er the flood,
And waves were white below,
No more shall feel the victor’s tread,
Or know the conquered knee;
The harpies of the shore shall pluck
The eagle of the sea!

Oh better that her shattered hulk
Should sink beneath the wave;
Her thunders shook the mighty deep,
And there should be her grave;
Nail to the mast her holy flag,
Set every threadbare sail,
And give her to the god of storms,
The lightning and the gale!
So, in 1830, when a story in the Boston Advertiser said that the U.S.S. Constitution was to be scrapped, lots of people were upset. The story was wrong; the navy was actually planning to overhaul the ship, but a young medical student, Oliver Wendell Holmes, didn't know that. He sat down and wrote a poem called "Old Ironsides." It captured the public's imagination and was soon reprinted all over the nation. The Constitution had been famous before, but that poem made it even more so. Children in school were soon memorizing it. In 1844, the ship embarked on a round-the-world voyage that included visits to 25 foreign ports for diplomatic, scientific, and business affairs. She was seen as a symbol of the United States; her name added to that image.

In the 1850s, Old Ironsides became a flagship of the African Squadron. That squadron was organized to patrol the west coast of Africa and keep slave ships from sailing illegally for the United States. The Constitution captured one of those slavers.

After that, she was mostly used as a training ship. By the end of the Civil War, all five of her sister ships had been turned into scrap. In 1897, Massachusetts congressman John Fitzgerald (President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's grandfather) had her moved to Boston for her 100th birthday. But the old ship was beginning to wear out, and someone suggested she be used for target practice. That enraged some Americans— including a group of schoolchildren—who helped raise more than $600,000 to restore the ship.

In 1947, another anniversary, the U.S. Post Office issued a commemorative stamp with a picture of the three-masted frigate. (It then cost three cents to mail a first-class letter.) In 1997, she celebrated her 200th birthday by sailing under her own power into Boston harbor. Today the Constitution is still a commissioned warship, and the world's oldest still afloat. She is docked in Boston and visited by nearly a million people a year.

Now, back to land and the 19th century. It's 1817 and a new president is taking office.
August of 1814 was one of the hottest in the memory of the approximately 8,000 residents of America’s new capital. The sweltering, humid heat turned the stagnant marshes surrounding the city into thriving hatcheries for disease-carrying mosquitoes. To make matters worse, the city found itself the target of an invading British army slowly making its way from the Chesapeake Bay.

America had been at war with the British Empire since 1812, but the action so far had consisted of a series of indeterminate skirmishes along the Great Lakes region. With the defeat of Napoleon, the British Empire turned its full attention to its former colony sending its battle-hardened troops to squash the up-start Americans. Washington had little strategic value - the thriving port of Baltimore was much more important. However, as capital of the nation, the British hoped that its burning would have a psychological impact on the will of the Americans to continue the conflict.

As the British army of approximately 4,000 approached, the majority of Washington residents fled the city. On August 24th American defenders, with President James Madison in attendance, were quickly routed by the invaders in a battle at Bladensburg a few miles from the city. A messenger was dispatched to the White House to warn First Lady Dolley Madison of the impending arrival of the British. She and her staff fled by carriage across the Potomac River, taking with her the full-length portrait of George Washington that had been torn from a White House wall.

That evening, the vanguard of the British army reached Capitol Hill and began its systematic destruction of all public buildings in the city.

George Gleig was part of the British force that attacked and burned Washington. Too small in size to effectively occupy the city - their intent was to cause as much damage as they could. We join Gelig’s story as the British send a truce party to negotiate with the Americans:

All thoughts of accommodation were instantly laid aside; the troops advanced forthwith into the town,
and having first put to the sword all who were found in the house from which the shots were fired, and reduced it to ashes, they proceeded, without 'a moment's delay, to burn and destroy everything in the most distant degree connected with government. In this general devastation were included the Senate House, the President's palace, an extensive dockyard and arsenal, barracks (housing for soldiers) for two or three thousand men, several large storehouses filled with naval and military stores, some hundreds of cannon of different descriptions, and nearly twenty thousand stand of small arms. There were also two or three public rope works which shared the same fate, a fine frigate (type of ship) pierced for sixty guns and just ready to be launched, several gun brigs and armed schooners (type of ship), with a variety of gunboats and small craft. The powder magazines (place to store weapons and gunpowder) were, of course, set on fire, and exploded with a tremendous crash, throwing down many houses in their vicinity, partly by pieces of the wall striking them, and partly by the concussion (shock due to explosion) of the air whilst quantities of shot, shell, and hand grenades, which could not otherwise be rendered useless, were thrown into the river."

"The sky was brilliantly illuminated"

*While Gleig's regiment was sacking the city, the remainder of the British force marched into the American capital as night approached:*

"... the blazing of houses, ships, and stores, the report of exploding magazines, and the crash of falling roofs informed them, as they proceeded, of what was going forward. You can conceive nothing finer than the sight which met them as they drew near to the town. The sky was brilliantly illuminated by the different conflagrations (fire), and a dark red light was thrown upon the road, sufficient to permit each man to view distinctly his comrade's face.

...When the detachment (group of soldiers) sent out to destroy Mr. Madison's house (the presidential mansion) entered his dining parlor, they found a dinner table spread and covers laid for forty guests. Several kinds of wine, in handsome cut glass decanters (container for serving wine), were cooling on the sideboard; plate holders stood by the fireplace, filled with dishes and plates; knives, forks, and spoons were arranged for immediate use; in short, everything was ready for the entertainment of a ceremonious party. Such were the arrangements in the dining room, whilst in the kitchen were others answerable to them in every respect. Spits (rods used for cooking meat), loaded with joints of various sorts, turned before the fire; pots,