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Tazewell County Board

Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service

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May ASO Magazine Column **History's Noteworthy Twist of Fate**

We have all grown up with the comforting knowledge that the United States Navy that we have known is the most elite, best equipped naval force the world has ever known. But today I want to take a look back at the very humbling beginnings of the Navy. By the time we end this story, you will be able to see for maybe first time one of the largest Twist of Fate episodes in the History of the United States.

The debate concerning the creation of a United States Navy started immediately following the organization of the federal government with the acceptance of the Constitution. The debate was centered on what this new force would be used for. Was it to protect the ports of the United States, in the role of defense? Would it be used to put armed force on foreign shores? Should we build lots of small ships or a few of the largest vessels of the time, 74 gun Battleships. The debate in Congress, and also in President George Washington's cabinet, was divided into two groups; one side of Alexander Hamilton and the Federalist and the other side of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and the Democrat-Republicans (not the current Republican Party).

The Democrat-Republican's being lead by Thomas Jefferson in Washington's Cabinet and James Madison in the Congress argued for a defensive, volunteer unit similar to the Minutemen of the Revolutionary War. This Civilian Navy would have small vessels about the size of a small coastal fishing boat with one or maybe two sails and oars and would be armed with one 32 pound mortar. These little boats could be used for harbor defense but would not be seaworthy enough for trips away from the coast. They could be dismantled and stored in buildings around the communities the volunteers lived in during peace time and when called upon, they could be re-assembled and ready to defend their ports. This vision of volunteers defending their communities matched perfectly with Jefferson's idea of a rural America.

The Federalist being lead by Alexander Hamilton argued for large ships, not as big as the 74 gun Battleships of the English Navy but larger and faster than the majority of their Naval Ships, the English Frigates. They turned to Philadelphian shipbuilder Joshua Humphreys for assistance. He listened to their ideas and suggested 44 gun frigates that would be built with heavier, stronger lumber and built with a new larger design that would make them superior to any other frigate.

The key to Humphreys design was he called on using Southern Live Oak, *Quercus virens*, for the key pieces of the frame, including the futtocks, knight heads, hawse pieces, bow timbers, stanchions, knees, transoms and breasthooks. The downside was that Southern Live Oak is only found in Southeastern United States and only in a twenty-mile-wide coastal zone stretching from Southern Virginia to East Texas. They would also only be able to use the oldest specimens, maybe one in fifty, in order to get the length of finished wood they would need.

The greatness of the Southern Live Oak is the strength of the wood. A mature tree will only grow 40 to 70 feet high but its branches can spread to a radius of 75 feet and shade over a half an acre. Its main branches, each weighing a few tons a piece, grow at a right angle to the amazingly strong trunk. This

dense, strong wood would later make history for one of these frigates as well as earn it the name “Old Ironsides”.

The debate came to a head on March 10th, 1794, with the vote in the House of Representatives on the Act to Provide Naval Armament. The vote of 50–39 was along party lines with the Federalist winning and Congressman James Madison and his Democrat-Republicans coming up six votes shy of blocking its passage. Passage in the Senate quickly followed and President Washington signed it into law on March 27th.

The Act to Provide Naval Armament called for the construction of four 44 gun frigates and two 36 gun frigates. It gave the President the authority to appoint six captains who would supervise the construction of their individual ships. These six frigates would be built in six different ports. While all would build the same ship designed by Joshua Humphreys, Washington wanted to spread the financial benefits to the six most populous and wealthy ports. The four 44 gun Frigates would be built in Philadelphia (the *USS United States*), Boston (the *USS Constitution*), New York (the *USS President*), and Norfolk (the *USS Chesapeake*). The two 36 gun Frigates would be built in Baltimore (the *USS Constellation*) and Portsmouth (the *USS Congress*).

While construction of several of these six frigates would be halted several times after the Democrat-Republicans later took control of the Presidency and Congress, all six would eventually be completed and would become the beginning of the great History of the United States Navy. They would prove their worth first against the Barbary States Pirates, then later against the French and British Navies. In an interesting twist of fate, the two strongest leaders against construction of these six Frigates, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, would later be elected President and during both of their terms they would benefit from these same six Frigates.

Thomas Jefferson upon being elected President called for the navy to be dismantled and the six Frigates be put in Dry Dock storage in Washington, DC.. He also called for the construction of his volunteer small ships he had originally proposed. The results of this new small boat force were disastrous. While in theory 74 of these small boats could be built for less cost than a 74 gun Battleship and would match it for firepower, in action it was hard to coordinate these attacks as these ships were hard to control in any conditions other than calm water. Also, just a close call miss-shot would cause serious damage to these small ships. Jefferson would never see the Dry Docking of the six Frigates as he would soon send them into action against Tripoli. The Frigates performance in this War with Tripoli would be a highlight of Jefferson’s Presidency and would take the United States Navy out of the “small little navy” status and into a leading world naval force.

James Madison would be elected President after Jefferson and while he shifted money back to the Frigates and canceled Jefferson’s small ship force, he still thought the army was of more importance than the navy. History would record the failure of his army during the War of 1812 with Britton while the navy he disliked and had lead the opposition to their construction while he was in the Congress would save the War for the United States and save his Presidency. The six Frigates would defeat more of the British ships than were lost and would seriously cost the British commercially as well as damaging their naval invincible image enough to bring the British to the table to talk peace.

Six Strong Frigates had brought peace for America, had left a positive mark on the Presidency of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and would inspire future President Theodore Roosevelt who during his administration would grow the United States Navy into the strongest naval force the world has ever seen. Roosevelt would later become famous for a quote: “Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick”. The United States Navy was his big stick.

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