

USS *Massachusetts* **Learn about the History** **Audio Transcript**

The oldest existing American battleship, USS *Massachusetts* was one of three Indiana class battleships, authorized in 1890 for the new steel navy. Among the most powerful ships of their time, *Indiana*, *Massachusetts* and *Oregon* were the first heavy caliber, heavy armor battleships to be built by the United States and the first to be given hull numbers. *Massachusetts*, BB2, was built by William Cramp and Sons of Philadelphia at a cost of \$3.4 million. Her keel was laid on June 25, 1891 and she was launched on June 10, 1893. Officially commissioned by the navy on June 10, 1896 she was just over 350 feet long with a beam of 69 feet and a draught of 24 feet. The battleship was designed to cruise at a maximum of 15 knots and was armed with two heavy 13" batteries and four 8" secondary batteries, as well as smaller ordnance. The larger guns were housed in two turrets, one mounted forward and the other mounted aft along the ship's center line as opposed to an offset design. This new feature limited the ship's field of fire but gave added stability to the craft. 8 8" guns were housed inside the mid ship section to form a citadel. Together with four torpedo tubes and a host of small arms the battleships combined firepower was a force to be reckoned with. To protect the ship an armored belt, up to 18" thick ran along the waterline in addition to side and deck armor plates. Below decks, armored columns extended down from each gun turret to protect machinery, crew and ammunition supplies. The ship was propelled by vertical triple expansion steam engines driving two shafts at almost 10,000 horsepower.

The crew, including 32 officers and 441 enlisted men, her first commander was Captain Frederick Rogers. The new battleship was assigned to the North Atlantic Squadron. After a Boston parade in her honor in the spring of 1897 the secretary of the Navy and the Governor of Massachusetts presented the ship with a bronze turret sculpture of winged victory which was mounted on the front of turret #1. With the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, *Massachusetts* was called in to battle. She sailed to Cuba with the Flying Squadron to help blockade the ports of San Fuegos and Santiago. On the 31st of May, 1898 America's second battleship saw her first combat. Along with *Iowa* and *New Orleans* she exchanged fire with *Christobal Colon* forcing the Spanish cruiser to retire into the inner harbor of Santiago. She also helped to sink *Rellena Mercedes* before being ordered to support the occupation of Puerto Rico. Afterward, *Massachusetts* performed a variety of duties conducting battle practice in several ports including Pensacola. During a 1903 winter cruise, target practice off Calibra resulted in a premature detonation in one of the 8" turrets causing the loss of nine sailors. In 1906 she was decommissioned. Refitted in 1910 with a caged mainmast and other modern hardware including one of the first shipboard wireless telegraphs, the battleship was placed in reduced commission to serve as a summer practice ship for midshipmen. *Massachusetts* represented a transitional stage in battleship technology. She and her sister ships were built to guard the coasts and harbors of the United States against invading forces. They taught the U.S. Navy very valuable lessons that could not have been learned any other way.

To the men who served on her she was more than just a battleship. The men polished her brass fittings and cleaned her wooden deck because she was their home and their protector. They proudly sailed the seas knowing that they were aboard one of the most powerful and beautiful

ships on Earth. But these men did not always have it easy, they had to constantly feed the coal burners to keep the ship powered, clean the guns and ammunition and then check and recheck them to maintain battle-readiness. They lived in small quarters, sailed through rough seas and were away from daily comforts. Yet throughout these difficult tasks and times, recreation was encouraged. The Navy learned long ago that it was important to keep up the men's spirits in the face of such demanding times. Before retiring to their hammocks for the evening, the men were sometimes allowed to purchase small amounts of beer. They also formed a football team and held boxing matches to help relieve tensions aboard, and on holidays special dinners were cooked for those not lucky enough to be at home with family. Overall, those who lived, worked and died in her service know that *Massachusetts* was a fine ship.

After war was declared with Germany, the nation's oldest battleship served as a gunnery practice ship for naval reserve crews. In 1919 she returned to Philadelphia and was decommissioned for the final time. Stripped of her guns and furnishings the obsolete ship was towed in January of 1921 to Pensacola to be used as a target for experimental artillery, and scuttled just outside the entrance to the bay. The Army brought in guns by rail from as far away as Virginia and positioned larger ones well inland, north of Pensacola. The battleship served her country one last time as she was subjected to more than 100 rounds of artillery fire. Scarred and torn the ship sat peacefully in the Gulf of Mexico attracting fish and fisherman alike until 1956, when several scrap companies joined forces to salvage the wreck. With the support of the people of Pensacola the state filed an injunction to prevent the salvage and when the case was brought before the Florida Supreme Court, title to *Massachusetts* was awarded to the State of Florida. Then in 1990 the sunken ship was nominated by a Pensacola diver to become Florida's fourth shipwreck preserve. State archaeologists gathered historical data and the ship's plans, recorded the underwater wreckage and made a formal proposal to the people of Pensacola for a cooperative project to establish the preserve. Once again the public rallied around the old battleship. The preserve was dedicated on June 10, 1993 on the 100th anniversary of the ship's launching. In 2001 USS *Massachusetts* was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.