

USS *Constitution* vs HMS *Cyane* and HMS *Levant*

Classroom Activities

1. Pension records reveal a lot of information about the men who served on *Constitution* during the War of 1812. As a class, read the record for Tobias Fernald who fought in the battle against *Cyane* and *Levant* and discuss the merits of his application. Then, perform the skit in Appendix 1 below and have students vote on Mary Kearney's application. A biography of Mary Kearney is also included.
2. Using the search feature, find and read the journal of David Debias, an 8-year old African American who served on *Constitution* during the battle against *Cyane* and *Levant*. Read to students "David's Story" in Appendix 2 and ask them to write a letter home from David's point of view, describing the battle and his role in it.
3. Study the battle diagram and the painting depicting the battle and ask students to compare them to those of the other two battles *Constitution* fought in the War of 1812. How are they the same? How do they differ? Fill out the compare and contrast chart in Appendix 3.

Appendix 1

Pension Skit

Chair:

Mary Forrest Kearney, step forward please.

Mary:

I'm Mary Kearney, widow of surgeon John Kearney.

Chair:

The service record for Surgeon John Kearney states he was born in Ireland in 1793. Enlisted in the Navy as a surgeon's mate in 1809. Promoted to surgeon in 1814 and served under Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry. In May that year, he exchanged stations with Dr. Cotton, surgeon on *Constitution*.

Mary:

Yes, sir. To the best of my knowledge that is correct. We wed on December 3rd 1835 in Washington DC.

Chair:

Are you familiar with his duties aboard ship?

Mary:

He was truly excited to be aboard such a great ship and working for Captain Stewart. My John was on board for the battle against His Britannic Majesty's ships *Cyane* and *Levant*. What an amazing battle that was – one American ship fighting two British ships!

Chair:

I read about that battle. Captain Stewart certainly out-did himself – taking on two British ships at once.

Mary:

Being a ship's surgeon was difficult during battle. John told me stories of how at the start of the battle he and his mates would be down in the cockpit, on their hands and knees, because the ceiling is so low, waiting by the light of a few battle lanterns, with their knives sharpened and their hearts pumping.

Chair:

It must have been awfully difficult to operate in those conditions.

Mary:

He'd say "the blood ran down from the deck as freely as if a wash-tub had been turned over." Wounded men would be passed down to the cockpit with the utmost haste. All in time of no more than twenty or thirty minutes before the firing ceased. John was a good surgeon, but he never got over the sights

and sounds of the wounded and dying.

Chair:

His record states that after the War he served as surgeon at the Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston. Then during the Seminole War they sent him to Fort Brooke in Florida.

Mary:

In 1841, before he went to Florida, while he was president of the Board of Naval Surgeons, I gave birth to twin boys. Oh they were darling little boys. Unfortunately the little one lived only 20 days, but the other has grown into a strong boy.

Chair:

And the cause of your husband's death?

Mary:

Just this past year, John was appointed Surgeon of the Fleet in the Gulf of Mexico. He was so proud, but not long after he arrived he contracted yellow fever. You've heard the expression, sir, "physician heal thyself?" 'Twas not to be for my dear John. No man can cure the yellow fever. It was in the Naval Hospital on the Island of Salmandina that he passed away on August 27th.

Chair:

I am sorry for your loss.

Mary:

I don't know what to do ... how can I provide for my family? I have no job, nor means to provide a living. I'm here to ask you to provide a pension for me and my seven-year-old son, so that we may have the same comforts of life that we had when John was alive.

Chair:

You have presented us with an interesting case. I will discuss it with my colleagues and inform you of the decision.

Mary Forrest Kearney:

Born Mary M. Forrest in 1807. Mary's father Richard Forrest was educated in France, and married Sarah Craufurd. They settled in Georgetown where Richard was the postmaster. Richard served as a clerk in the State Department from 1801-1828. Richard and Sarah moved to Washington in 1800 and owned/occupied a double brick house near the southeast corner of F and 14th Streets. The Forrest family was well-connected in Washington and friends with many of the leading names of the Federal era, including the John Quincy Adams family, the Madisons, and the Tayloes.

Mary's great-great grandfather Patrick Forrest (d. 1675) a member of the Maryland House of Burgesses and grandson of Sir Anthony Forrest who came with his wife (the first gentlewoman to land in America) and son in 1608 to Jamestown, VA with Captain John Smith.

Married Dr. John A. Kearney on December 3, 1835 in Washington, DC. Gave birth to twin boys – Julius and Richard – on July 5, 1841. Julius lived only 20 days, but Richard lived until April 19, 1900.

Daughter Kate Kearney Henry (date of birth unknown).

After John's death, Mary purchased a house on the southwest corner of 18th and G streets. Mary died July 25, 1885.

Dr. John A. Kearney was born in Ireland on June 21, 1793. His parents immigrated to America around 1798. Father was an architect and land-owner in DC. He joined the US Navy as a surgeon's mate on March 3, 1809. He was promoted to surgeon on July 24, 1814 and served in the capacity with the Newport, RI gunboat flotilla under the command of Oliver Hazard Perry. In May 1814, Kearney exchanged stations with Dr. Cotton, surgeon of USS *Constitution*, and entered the ship on June 11. He was on board for the engagement with HMS *Cyane* and *Levant*. He stayed on board until September 10, 1815 and then took up the post of surgeon at the Charlestown Navy Yard in 1816. During the Seminole War, Kearney was sent to Fort Brooke in Florida, and remained during the spring of 1837. From 1841-1847 Kearney was president of the Board of Naval Surgeons, a post he gave up in 1847, when on the 7th of May of that year he was appointed Surgeon of the Fleet in the Gulf of Mexico. He was not long on the job before he contracted yellow fever and entered the Naval Hospital on the Island of Salmandina. It was there on August 27, 1847, that he died at aged 53. His body was returned to Washington, DC and he was interred at the Congressional Cemetery on March 1, 1848.

David's Story:

The Journey of a Black Sailor from Beacon Hill to the Decks of USS *Constitution*

My name is David Debias. I was born on August 9, 1806 on Belknap Street. That's in a part of Boston called Beacon Hill. Lots of free Black people live there just like me.

My father was a chimney sweep. He cleaned out the chimneys of people's fireplaces. When I was little I would help my mother do chores around the house, like hauling water and gathering firewood. Sometimes we would walk down to the harbor and watch all of the ships coming and going. I dreamed of someday being a sailor.

My dream came true on December 17, 1814. America was at war with England and needed sailors to help fight. I joined the crew of USS *Constitution*, the most famous ship in the United States' Navy because she had already beaten two English ships. I was only eight years old. They gave me the rank of boy because I didn't have any sailing experience. There were several other free Black men, just like me, on *Constitution*.

We set sail the next day. It was very exciting. We sailed out into the Atlantic Ocean. On board the ship we ate salted meats and dried vegetables, along with ship's biscuit that was so hard we had to soak it before we could chew it. My main job was to serve the ship's Master's Mate, Mr. Leighton. I ran his errands and got his supper and all the while I was watching, listening, and learning from the other sailors about their jobs. You know, I was learning the ropes.

One day Lieutenant Hoffman's dog, Guerriere, jumped up atop a carronade then onto the hammock clothes and started barking loudly. Lieutenant Ballard looked to see what had attracted Guerriere's attention. A ship! The marine drummer played the signal to call us to our battle stations. We weren't sure if she was an enemy English ship, but we wanted to be prepared just in case.

It turned out that the ship was a merchant ship carrying trade goods from Argentina to England. Her cargo included animal hides, wool, tallow for making candles, and best of all two jaguar cubs. Captain Stewart had them put in one of *Constitution's* boats that were stored in the middle of the Ship. It was fun to watch them play. The captain's steward let me help feed them sometimes, when no one else was looking.

On February 20th we were sailing off the coast of the Madeira Islands west of Africa. We spied two sets of English sails on the horizon – they turned out to be HMS *Cyane* and HMS *Levant*. The enemy! We cleared the decks for battle – this time it was real. I helped pass powder charges from the main hatch to the carronades on the spar deck.

Everyone stood quietly at the guns as we watched the enemy ships approach. I'd never been so quiet in

all my life. I could hear my heart beating. I was a little scared, but I put on a brave face. With so little wind, it took forever for the ships to sail close to us. Finally, I heard Captain Stewart yell, "Hoist the colors." I turned my face towards the stern of the ship and saw the American flag being raised. One of our guns fired a shot between the English ships. This encouraged the English to start firing at us. The battle was noisy and there was a lot of smoke in the air from the guns. Sometimes we had to stop firing and wait for the smoke to clear to see where the enemy was. I continued to pass powder to the guns, so that they could be loaded and fired. Captain Stewart made *Constitution* sail backwards, and we beat both ships! *Constitution* is a lucky ship and that day she showed us why she was so special. After the battle, we took the English crew as prisoners on *Constitution*. I was assigned to the prize crew of the HMS *Levant*. This meant we got to sail her back to port and received bonus money for winning the battle. It was an honor to be part of the prize crew. We sailed to the Cape Verde Islands, where we hoped to get fresh provisions and send our prisoners home to England.

The next morning the quartermaster spied some English ships near the harbor. Captain Stewart told the American crews on *Constitution*, *Cyane*, and *Levant* to set sail and get out of the harbor as fast as we could. *Constitution* and *Cyane* got away. Unfortunately, the English recaptured the *Levant* and I became a prisoner of war.

The English took us to a prison on the island of Barbados. We were only here a short time when we learned that the war was over. Cheers rang out all over the prison. "Huzza! Huzza! Huzza!" We were free again. We sailed back to New York City on a smaller ship and then *Constitution* picked us up and we returned to Boston.

As we sailed into Boston Harbor we were greeted with cheers from people along the docks. They had heard of our victory over the English ships and were very happy. They threw lots of parties and many people congratulated us. Best of all, I got to collect my pay, \$6.00 for every month I served, plus my prize money. When I got off the Ship, I ran up State Street and headed straight for my house on Beacon Hill. I was ever so happy to be home again with my family. I am proud that I got to serve on the greatest ship in the United States Navy.