

Over her 200-year history, *Constitution* has played a part in the lives of many remarkable people. The following mini-biographies of some of these people can be copied for student reading or can be read aloud. You might ask students to select the character they identify with the most and to write why they chose this person. Ask them to draw or sketch this person's portrait using the "snapshot" here as a guide.

#### Right Man for the Wright Job

In 1794, Philadelphia Quaker Joshua Humphreys' days were filled to the brim building ships with his cousin John Wharton. But he was not going to turn down the Secretary of War when called upon to design *Constitution*. He'd been thinking about it, anyway, and his mind was churning with ideas. Born in Haverford, Pennsylvania in 1751, Humphreys had early shown promise in his trade. He was so valued by his employer, a noted local shipbuilder, that he was released from his **indenture of apprenticeship** to become the master shipwright of the yard.

As his thoughts took shape, Humphreys became convinced that America needed ships of a type never built before, ships best suited to our shores and pocketbooks and natural resources.

He took existing designs and made them better. One of his innovations was to affix long,

thick planks of wood, which had been soaked in boiling salt water and bent to fit on a **diagonal**, from the keel up along the insides of the ship to the beams of the berth deck where they were bolted into the hull. Humphreys' **diagonal riders** would keep the ship from twisting out of shape from the weight of her massive guns.

Humphreys also wanted to use only America's best raw materials, no matter the effort to get them. The live oak that Humphreys wanted grew along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, unreachable by roads. Yellow fever struck the camps of ax men, many of them slaves from local plantations, and many men died. Humphreys sent his son to help the men that were left, and eventually enough wood was harvested. People working on *Constitution* today say her design and materials are the reason she is still afloat.

#### Showing His Metal

Paul Revere was a good silversmith, but he was restless. After the Revolution, he wanted to keep pace with the rapid growth of the country. From the British, he had learned to heat copper so that it could be bent and shaped. He was also able to blend copper with zinc to make brass. In 1795 he put these skills to work furnishing *Constitution* with nails, staples, braces, spikes, bolts and other fastenings and fittings. He claimed to be able

to make things "as cheap as anyone and as well." From his blended metal he cast a 242 pound bell whose ring marked the watch on *Constitution's* decks. Revere charged 45¢ a pound for the bell, which came with a year's guarantee. Still searching for new **ventures**, in 1801 he built America's first copper rolling mill, which it is believed, turned out the thin sheathing to cover *Constitution's* hull when she was overhauled in 1803.

#### Tough Lessons, Tough Teacher

On a moonless night, September 10, 1803, a thick haze enveloped *Constitution* as she lay off Gibraltar en route to the Mediterranean. Suddenly, the vague outline of a ship loomed out of the mist. Commodore Edward Preble readied his sailors for action and threatened to fire if the ship did not identify herself. In a clipped British accent came the reply that if Preble did not immediately send a boat, he would receive a broadside from the 84-gun ship-of-the-line *HMS Donegal*. A broadside from such a large ship and at such close quarters would have blown *Constitution* to pieces, but without hesitation, Preble barked the

order, "Blow on your matches, boys!" The British bluff was called, and it was they who rowed a boat from what turned out to be a 32-gun frigate.

Edward Preble was no fan of the English. When he was a lad of 14, the British set fire to his home town of Falmouth (now Portland), Maine to punish residents for rebelling against the Crown in the Revolutionary War. The whole town was burned to the ground, including Preble's home. Within two years the young man got his revenge, working on a **privateer** raiding British ships in the Atlantic. Appointed midshipman on an American frigate, he became a prisoner