



A Monument to American Heroism: The Many Lives of Long Tom

Greeting visitors at the entrance of the National Museum of the United States Navy is a very large cannon. Nicknamed “Long Tom,” this 5,700-pound piece of iron is one of several guns at the Washington Navy Yard that memorializes the history of the United States Navy. Made famous by the War of 1812 privateer *General Armstrong* and its immortal captain Charles Reid, Long Tom took a long route to get to Washington, D.C. Naval artillery are among the most durable pieces of equipment ever made and survive many deployments and operations. Long Tom, however, more than just survived. It had a legendary journey worthy of Odysseus.

It should be mentioned from the start that man guns are named “Long Tom.” Some 19th century sources referred to any gun above a certain caliber as “Long Tom.” The U.S. Army’s famous series of M1 155mm artillery guns and four French-made 155mm artillery pieces used by Boer soldiers against the British Army during the Second Boer War all used the nickname “Long Tom.” Even some small arms received the name, including an English flintlock wildfowling gun that belonged to famed 18th century naturalist John Audubon. He used his Long Tom flintlock, as was the practice back then, to shoot birds to study for his artistic work *Birds of North America*.



French ship of the line Hoche under British colors as HMS Dongeal, Long Tom's first ship.

Dordogne, France to Tory Island, Ireland

The museum’s Long Tom was originally a 36-pounder smoothbore long gun, forged for the French Navy in Dordogne, France in 1786. The French Navy adopted the 36-pounder for use on the lower deck of its new ship-of-the-lines. The museum’s Long Tom was placed aboard the 74-gun *Hoche* and immediately went to work. In the 1790s, the French Republic formed three expeditions to assist Irish insurgents fighting for a free Ireland against their British overlords. *Hoche* led the third expedition of nine ships in

1798 out of Brest, France. On board *Hoche* was the leader of the Irish rebellion Wolfe Tone. A British squadron spotted *Hoche* and its ships and the two bitter enemies fought near Tory Island,

Ireland. Gale force winds severely damaged *Hoche*, leading to its capture by the British squadron.

The British respected French-designed warships and frequently recommissioned captured ships into the Royal Navy. *Hoche* was repaired and recommissioned HMS *Donegal*. The British, however, did not like French guns. The British used a smaller 32-pounder gun, which they thought was a superior weapon (a topic debated for many years). As a result, they put all of *Hoche*'s 36-pound guns on the open market. The Royal Navy found a buyer, not with a foreign government, but with John B. Murray, a New York City businessman and arms dealer.

Tory Island, Ireland to New York City

Murray was one of New York's leading men in the early 1800s. He did not acquire the guns out of patriotic duty; instead he was looking to flip the guns for a profit. He took all his newly purchased weapons and had them converted to 42-pounders, an American caliber for heavy guns. Murray marketed them to the U.S. Army, who took interest in the guns for use as coast defense weapons. The long range and heavy firepower of the cannons made them ideal for American coastal forts. The Army bought the lot, except for the cracked Long Tom. The arms dealer had blacksmiths repair the crack and put the gun back up for sale.

New York City to Haiti and Back

Long Tom sat in New York until 1804 when unknown representatives of the newly established Empire of Haiti purchased the gun. It is not clear what the nation did with the gun. One source claims it was placed aboard a privateer fighting on behalf of Haiti who battled with a French privateer. The gun eventually returned to the docks of New York City where it waited for its next conflict.

New York City to Suriname, South America

With the War of 1812, a privateering company purchased a brig named *General Armstrong*. Along with the ship, the company purchased Long Tom and eight much smaller nine-pounder guns. With a crew of 90 men, the brig put to sea out of New York in 1812 in search of British targets. The ship captured two prizes before heading south to South America. In early 1813, Guy R. Champlain took command as *Armstrong*'s second captain. Anchored in the Suriname River in the Dutch colony of Suriname, Champlain spotted a British ship. Thinking it was a large merchant ship, he ordered *Armstrong* to engage at close range. The British ship was not a merchant, rather it was the 30-gun sloop HMS *Coquette*. During the battle, a musket ball shattered Champlain's left shoulder. While receiving first aid, Champlain overheard some of his men wanting to surrender. Champlain responded with a threat to his

sailors that he would blow *Armstrong* rather than surrender. Nonetheless, Champlain's vessel was heavily outgunned and damaged. Shots from Long Tom damaged *Coquette* sufficiently to allow *Armstrong* to flee the scene. The ship headed for Charleston, South Carolina.

Suriname to the Fayal, Azores, Portugal

Once *Armstrong* was repaired, Reid put the ship to sea. He directed the ship across the Atlantic, where Armstrong raided coastal waters around Great Britain. It then shifted south towards Spain and then back home to New York City. During this second raid, *Armstrong* captured thirteen prizes. Among the thirteen was a British privateer that engaged in a pistol range fight with *Armstrong*.

Quickly resupplying the ship, *Armstrong* deployed on another cruise and headed towards



A Currier & Ives lithograph of the British assault on the privateer General Armstrong during the Battle of Fayal.

the Azores archipelago in early September 1814. *Armstrong* made port in Horta, a port town on the island of Fayal in the Azores. Three British warships en route from England to the Gulf of Mexico and New Orleans spotted the privateer. Even though the ships were supposed to participate in the upcoming assault on New Orleans and they were all in a neutral port, the British commander decided to attack the privateer. Using several small boats loaded with British marines and sailors, the assault began at 9p.m on September 26. Reid and his company fired back and fought the British for the next five

hours. They sank two of the British small boats and fought off a boarding attempt. Despite the defeat, the British sent in the sloop HMS *Carnation* to destroy it. Using Long Tom, Reid's gunners were able to repel *Carnation's* attack.

Despite the victories, Reid saw that *Armstrong* had been heavily damaged. He decided to scuttle the ship and its gear by sinking it in the harbor and seek protection with the American consulate. The Battle of Fayal made Reid a national hero for engaging in a fight despite being heavily outnumbered. Reid would later claim in his memoir that the battle also helped General Andrew Jackson win the 1815 Battle of New Orleans because the fight delayed some of the British forces. While modern historians dispute this statement, contemporary observers after the

war such as Andrew Jackson and Teddy Roosevelt accepted it as fact. Such endorsements elevated Reid and Long Tom's reputations to deity status.

Horta to Chicago, Illinois

After the War of 1812, the Portuguese government salvaged *General Armstrong* and all of its gear. As a measure of goodwill to the United States, the Portuguese gifted the brig's figurehead to John Dabny, the third generation American consulate in Fayal. He hung the figurehead on the gates of the consulate and decorated it on the Fourth of July. Some locals confused the figurehead for an unknown Roman Catholic saint and left food at the gates believing the Fourth of July was the figurehead's feast day.

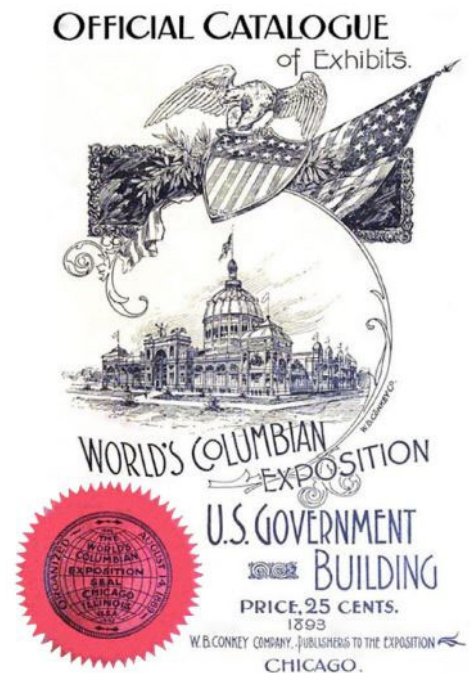
However, the goodwill only went so far. The Portuguese refused to give up any of the ship's weapons. They also refused to pay a \$131,000 claim submitted by the American Department of State for not protecting *General Armstrong* from British attack. The Americans pressed the claim for over 60 years and threatened further legal action. In the meantime, the Portuguese Army placed Long Tom on the ramparts of Fort of Santa Cruz overlooking the harbor of Fayal where it sat until the 1890s.

In 1891, Captain Reid's son, Samuel Reid, Jr., went to the Azores to find the gun that made his father a legend. After traveling to several of the Azorean islands, he discovered that the gun still existed at Fayal. He appealed to President Benjamin Harrison that the United States should do all it could to retrieve it. Reid, Jr. believed the gun should be made into a national monument in Washington, D.C. and that the gun represented "American prowess and heroism." The American ambassador made some inquiries with the Portuguese government. Portugal King Dom Carlos I, who at the time needed all the international goodwill he could get, agreed to gift the gun to the United States. The U.S. Navy picked up the gun in May 1892 and brought it home.

Chicago to Washington, D.C.

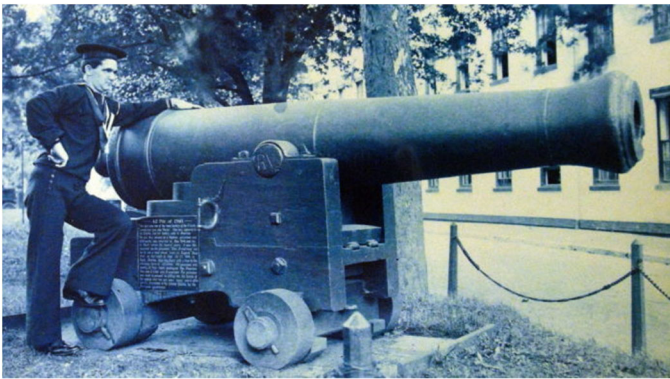
By the time Long Tom returned to the United States, its days as an effective weapon of war were long past. It was the beginning of an era of steel hulled ships and large, breech loading guns. While the concept of using Long Tom as a national monument to American heroism was shelved, the Navy found another use for it. The Navy needed

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money and public backing for this new fleet and needed to sell the idea. As a result, the Navy made several public relations moves to enhance its presence. As part of this plan, it decided to make a big splash on one of the most public stages: the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. For this world's fair, the Navy showcased its future and its past. To represent the future, the Navy built a full scale replica of the battleship USS *Illinois* (BB-7) on the shores of Lake Michigan. To showcase its past, the Navy made an exhibit on *General Armstrong* and its legendary fight against the British. Long Tom and the privateer's figure head were the exhibit's central artifacts.

Reporters from around the world wrote in wonder of the artifacts, retelling the tale of the Battle of Fayal. This included repeating the conclusion that because of the Battle of Fayal, the American won the Battle of New Orleans. They further noted that Long Tom's noble presence



A Sailor stands next to Long Tom after being moved to the Washington Navy Yard from Chicago.

stood in stark contrast to the giant German steel and gun manufacturer Krupp's cold and depressing exhibit on new German battleship guns.

Once the Exposition closed, the Navy brought Long Tom to Washington, D.C. for its final rest. With the idea of using the cannon as a national monument in downtown Washington not moving forward, the Navy brought the gun to the Washington Navy Yard to stand with many other historic weapons. The gun became a major highlight

for visitors and remains so to this day. The Naval History and Heritage Command recently restored the gun and it will continue to be a monument to American heroism for many years to come.