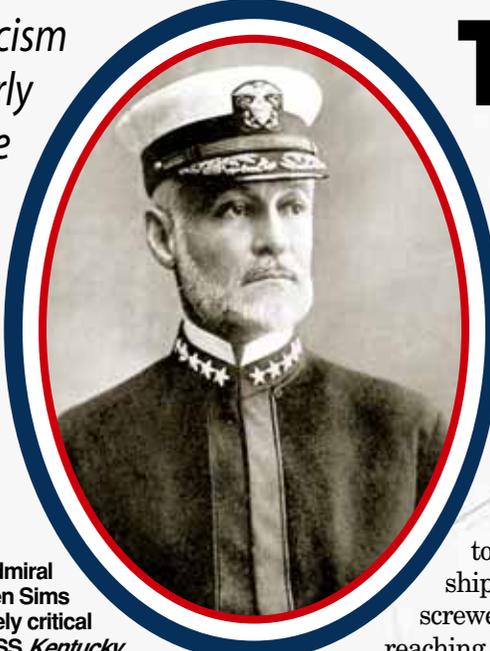


# “THE WORST CRIME IN NAVAL CONSTRUCTION EVER PERPETRATED BY THE WHITE RACE”

Was Adm. William Sims' criticism of the USS Kentucky overly harsh? This history of the Kearsarge-class battleship will let readers draw their own conclusion

BY CHARLES H. BOGART



Vice Admiral William Sowden Sims was extremely critical regarding USS Kentucky.

The pre-dreadnought battleship *Kentucky* (BB-6) was laid down in 1896, authorization for her construction being provided in the Naval Appropriation Bill of 2 March 1895.

The contract awarded to Newport News Ship Building Company called for two ships with a length of 375-ft 4-in, a beam of 72-ft 3-in, and displacing not over 11,540-tons. Armament was to consist of four 13-in, four 8-in, and 14 5-in guns plus numerous 6- and 1-pounders and four 18-in torpedoes. The ships were to be twin screws and capable of reaching 16-kts. The lead

ship of the class was assigned the name *Kearsarge* (BB-5) and the sistership the name *Kentucky* (BB-6). With due ceremony, the hulls of both ships were laid down on 30 June 1896 and March 1898 and was witnessed by one of the largest crowds ever gathered for a ship launching. Many Kentuckians were in attendance as special excursion trains had been run from Louisville, Lexington, and Cincinnati to Newport News by the Chesapeake Ohio Railroad.

The first vessel down the ways was the *Kearsarge*, launched by Mrs. Herbert Winslow with the traditional bottle of champagne. The *Kentucky*, unfortunately, was not to feel any wine over her bow when launched. Miss Christine Bradley, daughter of Kentucky Governor William Bradley, influenced by the Women's Christian Temperance Union, chose to launch the *Kentucky* with a bottle of spring water from the Lincoln Homestead at Hodgenville, Kentucky. Legend has it that the only thing that prevented a major disaster, as a result of using spring water, was that numerous

“Kentucky Colonels” christened the *Kentucky* hull with bottles of bourbon as she slid down the way — so much bourbon being broken on her side

that yard personnel working on her slipway for months after the launching reportedly became intoxicated from the fumes given off by the bourbon that had soaked into the ground.

Though now afloat, it was to be another two long years before the *Kentucky* would be ready for active service. The major delaying factor was the inability of US industry to manufacture armor plate to Navy specifications. Much of the armor that was delivered was too brittle to stand up to the gunfire of existing naval weapons. The *Kentucky* was finally commissioned on 15 May 1900 by Capt. Colby M. Chester some three-months after the commissioning of the *Kearsarge*.

The *Kentucky* and *Kearsarge* when commissioned were the subjects of much discussion due to the arrangement of their 13- and 8-in guns. The 8-in guns were placed on top of the 13-in guns. The result was a two-storied turret, the upper turret being bolted to the lower turret so that it had to be trained in the same direction as the lower. Criticisms to such a system were that the firing of the upper turrets would render the lower

turret uninhabitable due to the concussion produced by the guns, the disabling of the turret rendered all four guns useless and all four guns had to fire on the same bearing.

Those in favor of the turrets pointed out to a saving in armor weight due to only having to protect one turret instead of two. This saving in weight allowed the mounting of more rapid-fire 5-in guns and allowed an increase in speed. Also only by mounting the two 8-in turrets this way could all four 8-in guns be fired on both beams. Any other type of mounting using the assigned displacement of the ships would have given the ships less firepower than the preceding four battleships of the *Indiana*-class. Conversely,

Magnificent study of USS Kentucky (BB-6) during 1900.

