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Article Summary: On March 3, 1899, Congress authorized construction of several new battleships and battle cruisers, which after the Civil War were to bear the names of states. One of the newly authorized ships was designated the USS *Nebraska*. This is her story.

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Photographs / Images: The *Nebraska* ready to join the Great White Fleet; During the first rivet in the *Nebraska*'s keel; Governor Savage's paycheck for helping to drive the first rivet (3 cents); Governor Savage and his entourage on the USS *Oregon* during their visit to the Northwest in 1902; Governor John Mickey's daughter, Mary; Christening the USS *Nebraska* October 7, 1904; Governor George L Sheldon and party on the deck of the USS *Nebraska*; USS *Nebraska* undergoing time trials; Coaling the USS *Nebraska*; USS *Nebraska*'s profile in 1907, 1918, and plan view; the *Nebraska* in her World War One camouflage paint



*The Nebraska dockside, ready to join the Great White Fleet. Note the clutter on deck and the double or "superposed" turrets. The bow ornament is now missing from Nebraska State Historical Society collections. Courtesy of Puget Sound Maritime Historical Society, Inc., Seattle, Washington.*

# The USS *Nebraska*

*By James A. Hanson*

The Spanish-American War of 1898 made the United States a world power and catapulted the nation into the arena of international diplomacy. With new responsibilities in Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and other far-flung islands, Congress began to build a two-ocean navy equal to America's status and needs.

The heavily armed and armored battleship was the ultimate weapon — the "Big Stick" — of the military at the turn

of the century. The battleship represented a major new concept in offensive warfare, carrying guns so powerful they could hurl half-ton shells thirteen miles (farther than gunners could see their targets), powered entirely by coal-fired steam engines, and built exclusively of steel. Technological advances, new theories of naval warfare, experimentation, and a world arms race led to crash ship construction programs in all the major nations.

At the naval battle of Santiago, Cuba, the U.S. Navy's biggest guns scored only one hit on the Spanish

fleet, nearly all the havoc being done by smaller guns of three-inch to six-inch bore. Therefore, our naval designers continued to load new ships with "mixed" batteries firing several sizes of shells. Further, the concept of protecting a battleship with smaller vessels was not uniformly accepted, so these large ships were fitted with a bewildering array of machine guns and smaller deck guns to drive away gunboats. Torpedoes were considered necessary, and even battleships were equipped with tubes below the waterline to fire them. It seems no possible armament combination was overlooked.<sup>1</sup>

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*James A. Hanson is director of the Nebraska State Historical Society.*

## The USS Nebraska

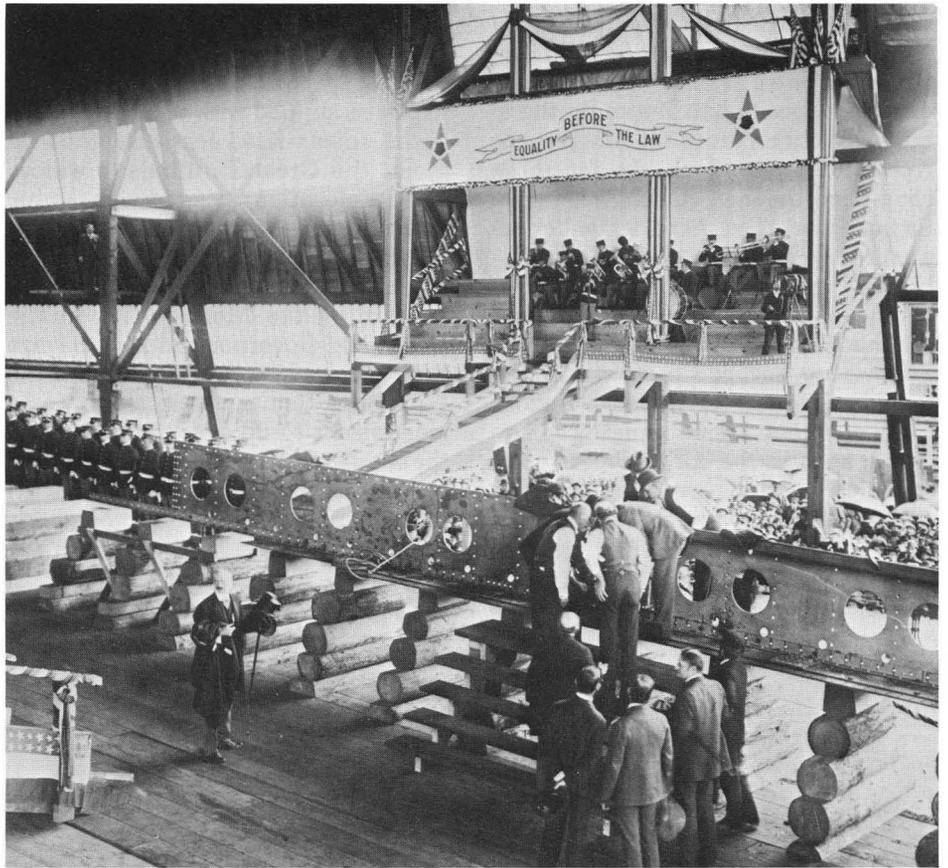
On March 3, 1899, Congress authorized construction of several new battleships and battle cruisers, which after the Civil War were to bear the names of states. One of the newly authorized ships was designated the USS *Nebraska*.<sup>2</sup>

It was the second American warship to bear that name. The first, a huge 5,000-ton ironclad with two revolving turrets, was laid down at Boston Navy Yard in 1865 as the USS *Shakamaxon* and renamed the USS *Hecla*. Still under construction in 1867, the name was changed again to honor Nebraska's admission to the Union. The Civil War had ended and construction funds dried up, so by 1875 the green oak timbers in the half-finished ship were twisting and beginning to rot. The first USS *Nebraska* was scrapped before it ever touched water.<sup>3</sup>

The contract for the second *Nebraska*, a large armored cruiser slightly smaller than a battleship, went to William Crump and Company of Philadelphia, while the contract for the battleship to be known as the *Pennsylvania* was won by Moran Brothers of Seattle. Pressure on the Navy from the Pennsylvania congressional delegation sparked by homestate pride got the names switched, and the *Nebraska* became the battleship to be built in Seattle, Washington.<sup>4</sup>

This was the first large ship to be built in the Pacific Northwest. The contractor, Moran Brothers, was a small firm that had been unable to bid successfully for government contracts due to higher labor costs and lack of capital. Finally the Seattle Chamber of Commerce provided the company with a \$100,000 subsidy raised by private subscription. Moran Brothers was then able to bid competitively, winning an important naval award and launching in Seattle a major new industry.<sup>5</sup>

Moran Brothers received the contract on January 6, 1901, but the first rivet in the keel was not driven until July 4, 1902. Nebraska Governor Ezra P. Savage headed a delegation of twenty-three state officials to attend



Driving the first rivet in the Nebraska's keel. Courtesy of Museum of History and Industry, Seattle, Washington... (below) Governor Ezra Savage received a paycheck for helping to drive the first rivet. (NSHS-MS725)

STEEL SHIPBUILDING      PAY CHECK No. 18487

## MORAN BROS. COMPANY.

SEATTLE, WASH.      JUL 4 - 1902

PAY ROLL	
PAGE	LINE
38	7
EMPLOYEE No.	
925	

**DEXTER HORTON & CO. BANKERS**

Pay to the order of Ezra P. Savage

Three Cents      no Dollars      No 03

*Being the amount due him in full for services to the above date.*

Certified Correct: *[Signature]*  
General Time Keeper

Countersigned: *[Signature]*  
Cashier

NOT VALID IF DRAWN FOR MORE THAN  
**TWO HUNDRED DOLLARS**  
**\$200.00**

MORAN BROS. COMPANY  
By *[Signature]*

the ceremony. He and Washington Governor Henry G. McBride, who participated "as a private citizen" because of union opposition to Moran Brothers' hiring practices, drove the first red-hot rivet and received checks for three cents each, the then-current wage scale for such work. Overhead, a giant crane was festooned with the word "Nebraska" in electric lights, and 7,000 people looked on, proud of the project that had come to their city.<sup>6</sup>

Governor Savage's party was entertained by the Seattle Nebraska-Dakota Club of Great Plains emigrés. They dined aboard the USS *Oregon* and toured Bremerton Navy Yard. Then the group partied its way down the coast to

Los Angeles, trying out trolleys and the latest novelty called the automobile. General A. W. Greeley, the Arctic explorer, supped with them, and some of the ladies visited Jessie Benton Fremont, the Great Pathfinder's widow. The delegation visited Yosemite, where a tree was named in honor of Nebraska's governor. On the return trip to Nebraska the group attended a concert by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and Governor and Mrs. Savage were received by the president of the Latter-day Saints. All in all, it was a magnificent to-do over one rivet, and the whole trip was commemorated in a syrupy, sixty-three-page booklet written and published by the governor's

wife six months later in Lincoln.<sup>7</sup>

On October 7, 1904, another Nebraska governor, John H. Mickey, led an entourage of two dozen Nebraskans to Seattle for the launching of the *Nebraska*, at that point consisting of the hull and internal machinery. Mickey's speech was interesting; he admitted Nebraskans knew little about ships and water but did mention we knew a great deal about prairie schooners, some of which had crossed Nebraska with pioneers heading for Washington. His daughter, Mary Nain Mickey, christened the ship *Nebraska* as it slid down the ways.<sup>8</sup>

As with Savage's party, the group also spent time sightseeing, including

*Governor Ezra Savage (atop gun turrets) and his entourage toured the battleship USS Oregon during their visit to the Northwest in 1902. The Oregon was typical of Spanish-American War era battleships. (NSHS-B336)*



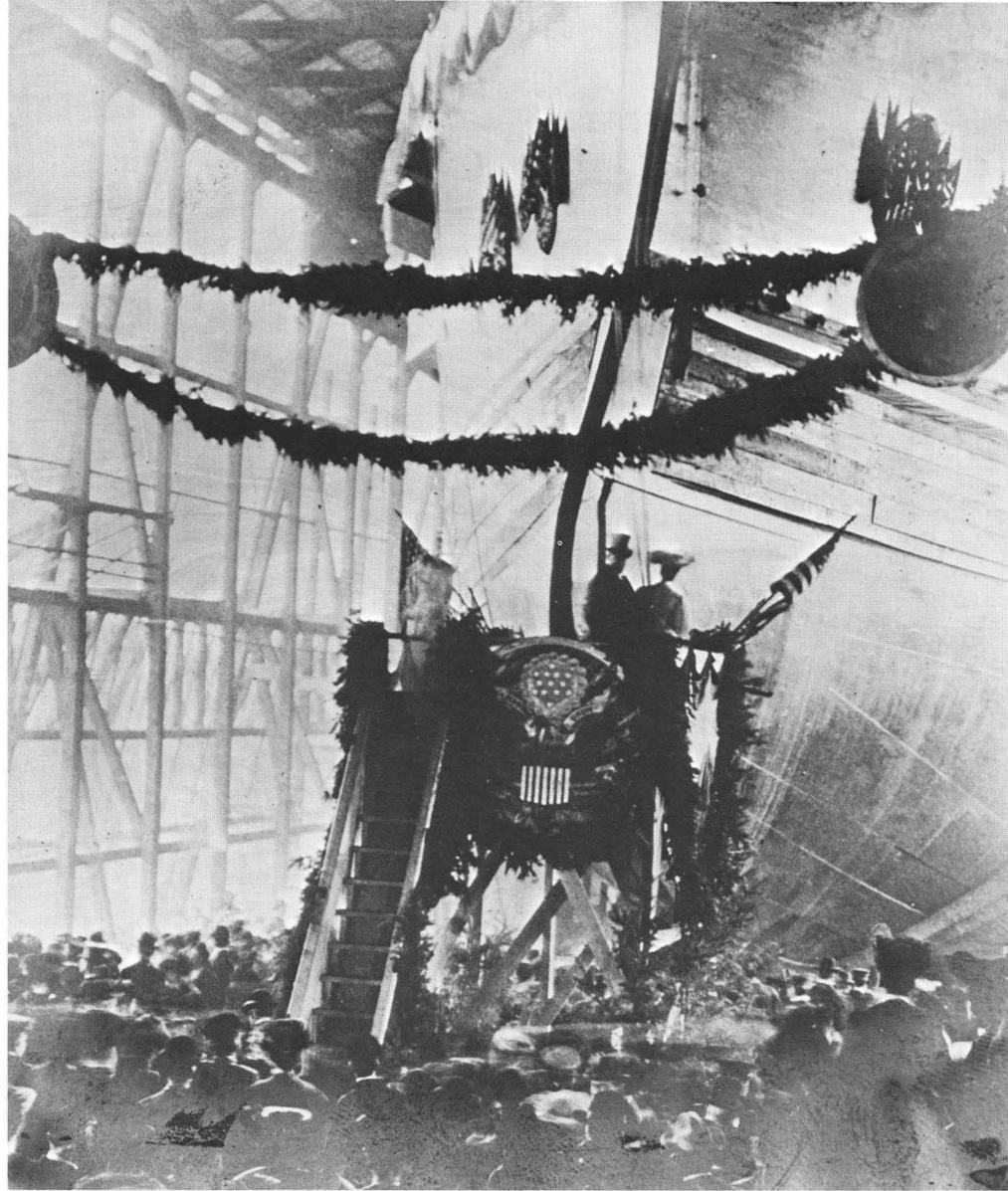


Governor John Mickey's daughter, Mary, christened the battleship Nebraska (NSHS-M626-5)

attendance at the Lewis and Clark Exposition in Portland, Oregon. Governor Mickey hoped for a return trip to the West Coast to deliver the silver service which each state felt honor bound to provide its namesake. Planning on a 1905 commissioning date, Mickey got the Nebraska legislature to appropriate the funds, then had the silver designed, manufactured, and delivered while he was still in office. However, the *Nebraska* was still under construction when his term expired.<sup>9</sup>

Another year and a half was spent completing the vessel, and on July 3, 1906, the ship was put through its first sea trials.<sup>10</sup> Finally, on July 1, 1907, the USS *Nebraska* was commissioned as a first line battleship in the United States Navy. She required the greatest length of time to build and was the last of her class to join the fleet.<sup>11</sup>

The *Nebraska*, later designated BB 14, the fourteenth battleship to be authorized by Congress, was one of five virtually identical vessels known as the *Virginia* class. These ships featured improved coal-fired boilers, which



Christening the USS Nebraska October 7, 1904. (NSHS-B336)

powered the steam piston engines that produced over 21,000 horsepower. Generators produced 500 kilowatts of electricity to power turrets, guns, boat cranes, shell hoists, and lights throughout the vessel. The impressive ship, with its backward-slanting prow, was 441 feet long and seventy-six feet wide with a depth below waterline of almost twenty-four feet.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the most unusual features of the *Nebraska* and its sister ships were the fore and aft "superposed" turrets. In this system, the main battery turrets were actually two stories high, with a second battery of eight-inch guns atop the twelve-inch guns. The idea was to reduce both the space needed to place turrets and the amount of armor necessary to protect the guns and ammunition. However, the guns could

not fire at separate targets, the added weight caused equipment problems in revolving the turret, the blast from the upper guns was disconcerting to the crew of those below, and broadside fire caused increased rolling of the ship since the upper guns were so high above the waterline. Naval officers also noted that if one turret was knocked out, four guns in all would be out of action.<sup>13</sup>

There were also two eight-inch gun turrets, each with two guns, on either side amidships. The Navy persisted in placing "casemate" batteries below the main deck, a holdover from sailing days when guns bristled out each side and fired through gunports. These low gunports allowed large quantities of water to enter during rough weather. The *Nebraska* carried twelve six-inch guns



Governor George L. Sheldon (front left) and party on the deck of the USS Nebraska. (NSHS-B336X)

and six three-inch guns in the lower broadside battery and six more three-inch guns on the top deck. Originally designed to have four twenty-one-inch torpedo tubes, the Navy dropped them from the *Nebraska's* plans because the torpedoes then in use were not reliable.<sup>14</sup>

The *Nebraska* displaced 14,865 tons, an amazing twenty-four percent of which was thick Krupp steel armor. An eleven-inch-thick belt on the sides protected the central parts of the ship, with twelve inches of armor on main turrets. Nine inches of steel protected the bridge and operational areas. A special "protective deck" of three-inch steel plate offered further security. The *Nebraska* also had a double hull, and coal bunkers were arranged to further absorb the impact of enemy fire.<sup>15</sup>

At a completed cost of \$6,832,796.96, the *Nebraska* was the most expensive of its class and took the longest to build,

due mainly to labor disputes. With its crew of forty officers and 852 men, a top speed of 19.06 knots, and a range of 5,000 nautical miles, the *Nebraska* was an extremely powerful ship for its time.<sup>16</sup>

Normally carrying 900 tons of coal, it could take on a maximum load of 1,700 tons though some of it had to be stacked in sacks on the deck. The coal supply was loaded by human labor through numerous small hatches in the deck, a time- and labor-consuming process. As a bunker was emptied, coal from other bunkers had to be redistributed, and the coal had to be hauled to the boilers. It was filthy, backbreaking work that made many sailors feel they were more akin to miners.

Another great difficulty was ventilation. Huge ventilators forced air below decks when the ship was moving, but in temperate climates it was rarely less than ninety degrees Fahrenheit below

decks, and in the tropics, especially in port, the temperature often soared above 110 degrees. Coal in bunkers sometimes ignited by spontaneous combustion, causing troublesome fires that were difficult to control. (Such a fire is now believed to have caused the explosion that sank the *Maine*.)<sup>17</sup>

In 1908 Nebraska Governor George L. Sheldon traveled with a large entourage of 113 dignitaries to San Francisco, where he presented the magnificent silver service to the crew of the battleship as a gift from the people of Nebraska. Mrs. Sheldon presented a parade-size U.S. silk flag and pole to the ship on behalf of the Nebraska members of the Daughters of the American Revolution.<sup>18</sup>

The astonishing size of Sheldon's party simply to deliver a set of silver actually ordered by Governor Mickey is even more extraordinary when the list of participants is examined. Among

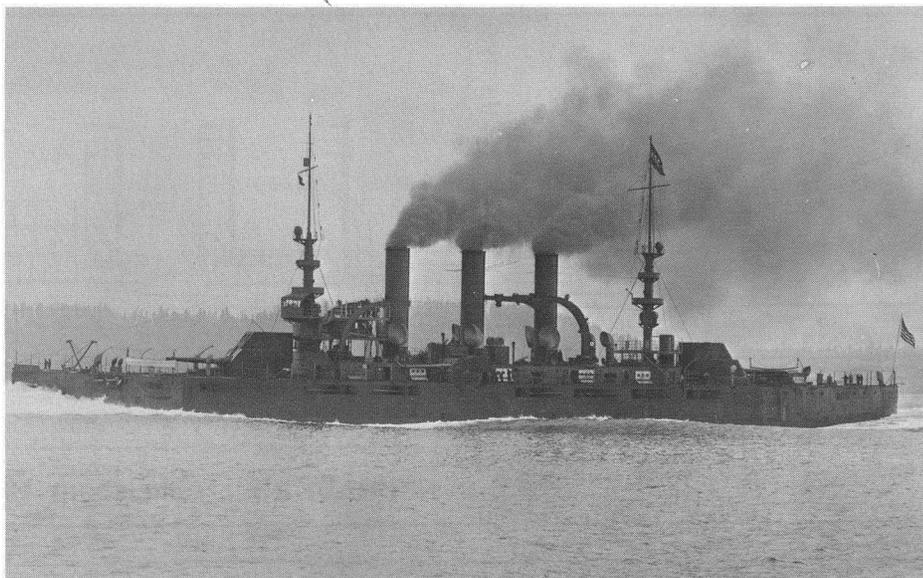
## The USS Nebraska

those in attendance were the inspector general of the Nebraska National Guard, the lieutenant governor, the governor's secretary, the secretary of state, the state auditor, the commissioner of public lands and buildings, the state treasurer, and the secretary of the state board of agriculture, along with thirteen Nebraska National Guard officers, two state senators, and a preacher. One wonders who was minding the helm of the ship of state back home. As with the other delegations, Sheldon's group vacationed, touring California, the Grand Canyon, and New Mexico among other wonders.<sup>19</sup>

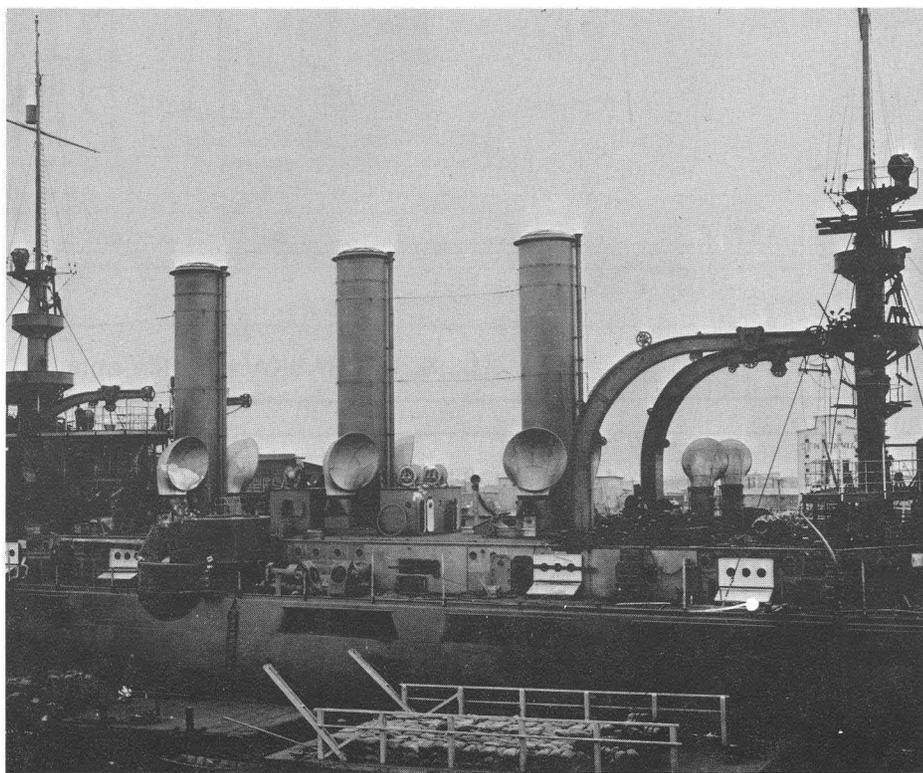
Over 100,000 visitors were on hand, but they had not come just to see Nebraska's gifts to its naval namesake. President Theodore Roosevelt had sent sixteen American battleships on a round-the-world cruise to show the U.S. flag. This "Great White Fleet" had arrived at San Francisco from the Atlantic at the same time as did Governor Sheldon's party. Two ships dropped out of the fleet there due to major mechanical problems, and the *Wisconsin* and *Nebraska* replaced them.

The impressive fleet visited Australia, New Zealand, China, the Philippines, and Japan before passing through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean. Passing Gibraltar, the fleet returned to Hampton Roads, Virginia, on February 22, 1909, in time for Roosevelt to review it before he went out of office on March 4.<sup>20</sup>

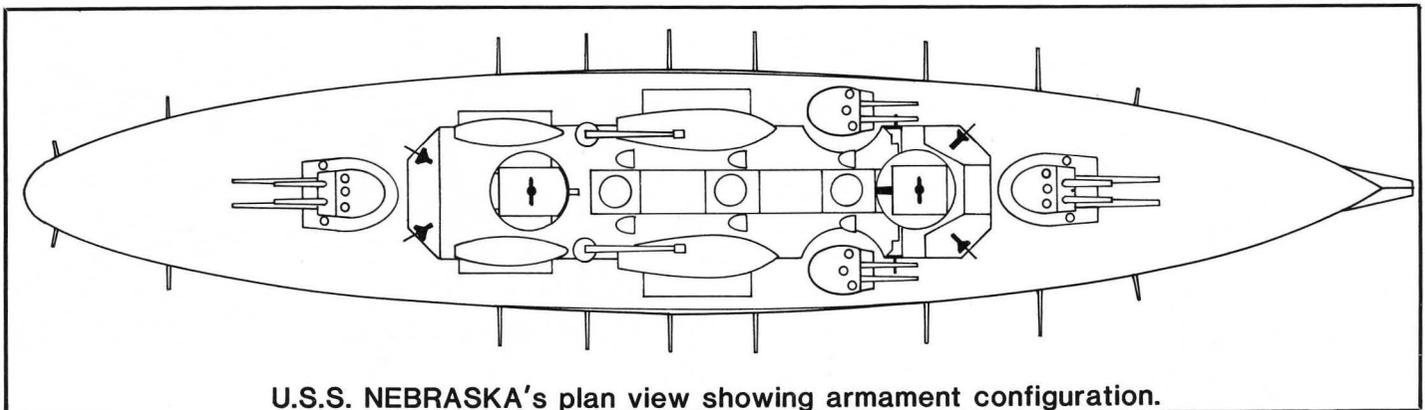
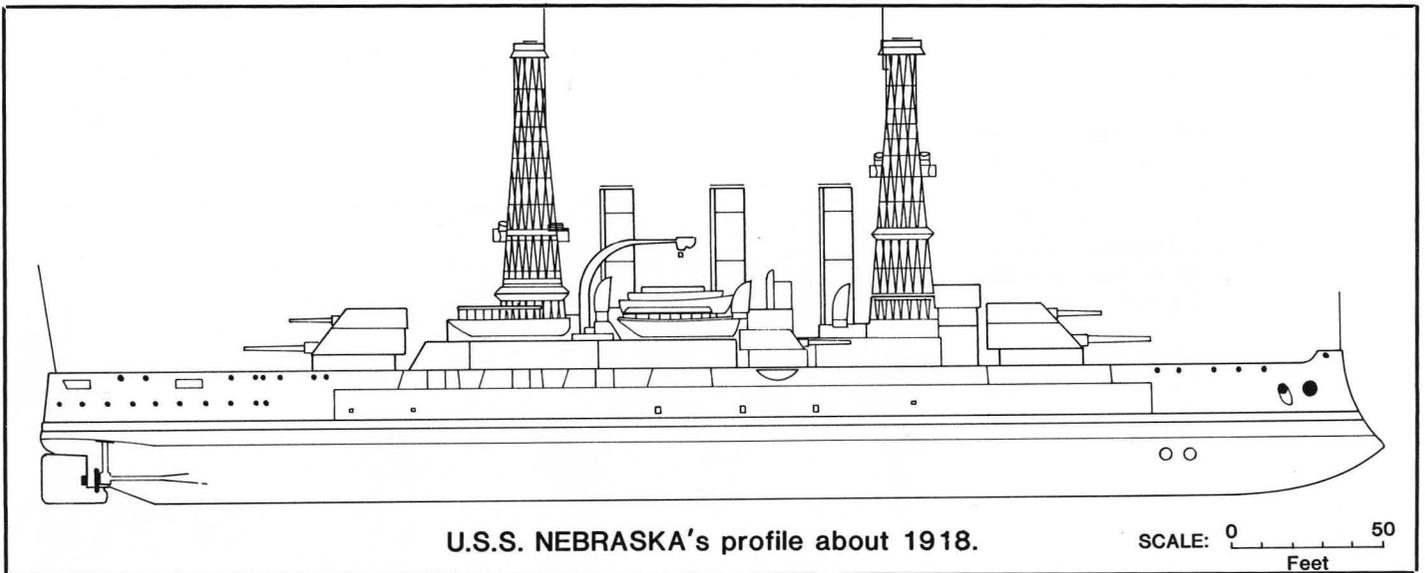
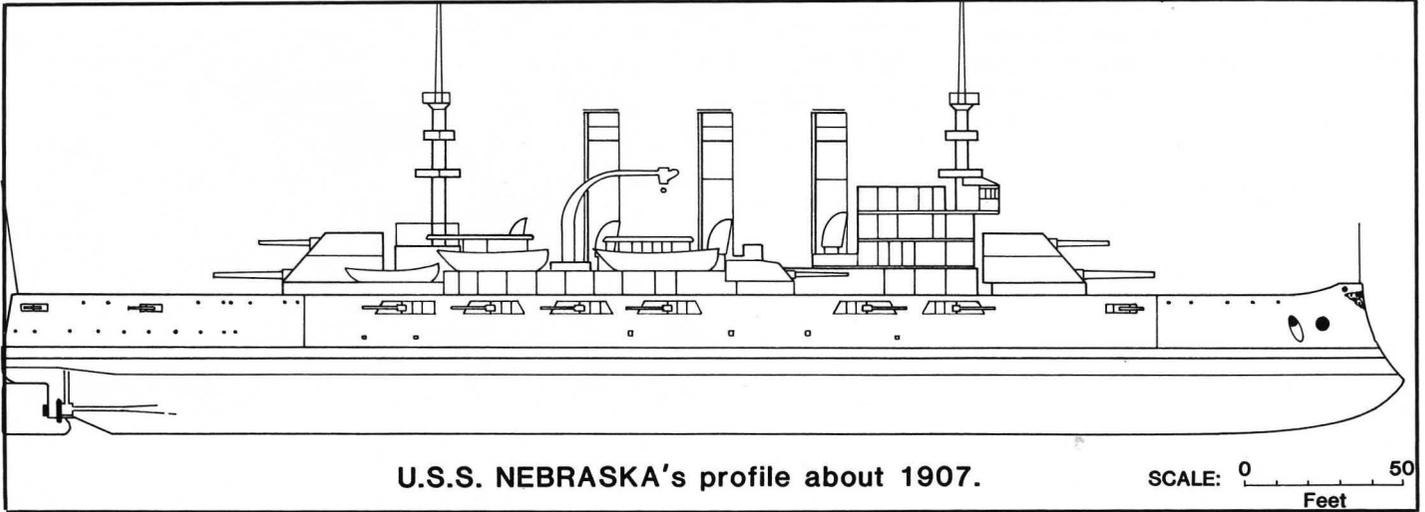
This circumnavigation of the globe had taught several important lessons to the U.S. Navy. As soon as the fleet was back, the shipyards were busy replacing the masts with taller, tubular steel "cage" or "basket" masts, a uniquely American feature which increased firing range by improving sighting distance. White and buff paint gave way to a new color, "battleship gray." Flammable wood decking was removed and replaced with "battleship" linoleum. The clutter of lifeboats, ventilators, ropes, hatches, and gangways was



*USS Nebraska undergoing time trials in Puget Sound. The ship reached 19.06 knots in passing this test. Courtesy of Puget Sound Maritime Historical Society, Inc., Seattle, Washington.*



*Cooling the USS Nebraska before her time trials. Courtesy of Museum of History and Industry, Seattle, Washington.*



## The USS Nebraska

greatly simplified to make a cleaner, safer top deck. The *Nebraska* was retrofitted with torpedo tubes since torpedoes had been greatly improved in range and accuracy.<sup>21</sup> The two-ton, cast-iron floral figurehead was also removed and then sent to the Nebraska State Historical Society, but it has unaccountably disappeared from Society collections.<sup>22</sup>

More importantly, Great Britain launched HMS *Dreadnought* in 1906, and by the time USS *Nebraska* was commissioned, most naval planners had begun radically rethinking previous notions. The *Dreadnought* eliminated the secondary batteries, its firepower concentrated in huge fourteen-inch guns, with all guns able to fire to either side. The British placed the intermediate batteries on cruisers which screened the battleships. Better range finding and fire control made the *Dreadnought* a truly strategic weapon able to destroy older fleets at the edge

of human sight. The all-purpose batteries of ships such as the USS *Nebraska* were outmoded. By 1914 all new U.S. battleships were following the *Dreadnought* pattern, and the *Nebraska*, in service only seven years, was already a second-class battleship.<sup>23</sup>

The USS *Nebraska* participated in the centennial observance in 1910 of Robert Fulton's invention of the steamboat and steamed up the Hudson River past New York. Later it attended the Louisiana Centennial in 1912. Between these important exercises it underwent the various alterations mentioned above.<sup>24</sup>

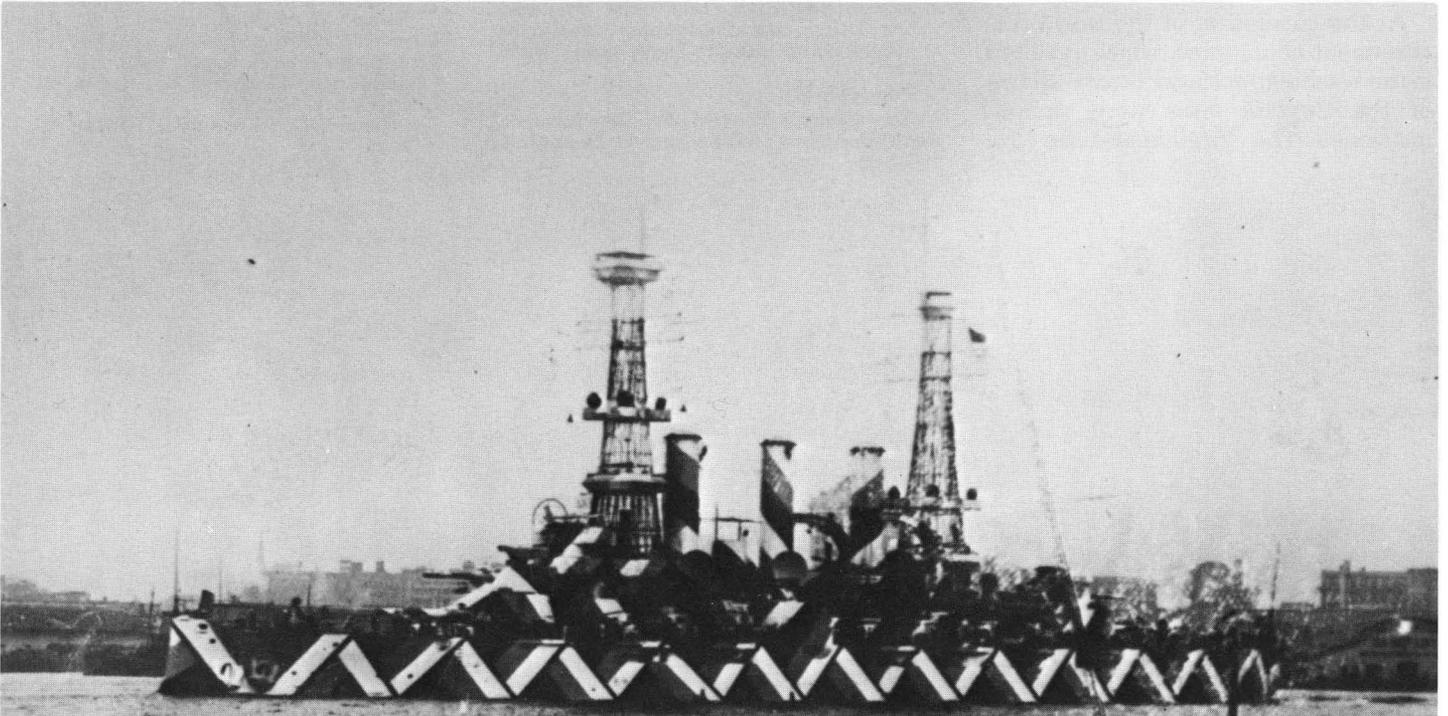
In 1914 President Woodrow Wilson tried to halt the flow of weapons to President Victoriano Huerta, dictator of Mexico, who was at the center of that country's bloodiest revolution. Wilson ordered the principal Mexican port of Vera Cruz closed by our navy. Ships bombarded the port and American troops finally captured it, but the *Ne-*

*braska*, which was part of the blockading squadron, was not called upon to fire a shot.<sup>25</sup> In 1916 the *Nebraska* again participated in a blockade of the same port.<sup>26</sup>

After that duty, the *Nebraska* was put on "reduced" service in Boston Harbor with a skeleton crew, serving as a training vessel to acquaint new recruits with naval vessels. With war imminent, the ship was returned to full commissioned status on April 3, 1917.

On April 6 the United States went to war with Germany, but the USS *Nebraska* was put in Boston Navy Yard for repairs. As a second-class battleship, it was unlikely that BB 14 would see much action, and the enemy's big ships had already been driven from the seas by the British. The *Nebraska* continued as a training ship. As deck guns were needed on merchant ships for defense against German submarines (which usually attacked while surfaced), the six-inch casemate guns were

*The Nebraska in her World War I camouflage paint. (NSHS-B336)*



stripped off the *Nebraska*, and the vessel repainted in a bizarre black, gray, and white rhomboid camouflage scheme.<sup>27</sup> The ship had further repairs made in January and April of 1918.

In May 1918 the USS *Nebraska* was called upon to return the body of the Uruguayan ambassador, Carlos Maria de Pena, who had died in Washington, D.C. The vessel made a leisurely voyage to Montevideo and returned in July. The German submarine menace being virtually ended, the *Nebraska* was pressed into duty in October and November escorting convoys to the mid-Atlantic, where protection duties were turned over to warships coming from Europe. When the war ended BB 14 became a troop transport, bringing home over 4,500 doughboys in four crossings between December and June 1919.<sup>28</sup>

The *Nebraska* served its last year in the Pacific fleet. Neither it nor the four sister ships in its class remained on active duty past 1920. The Navy, with newer, larger, and faster ships carrying bigger guns, deactivated BB 14 in July 1920.

At the conclusion of the world disarmament conference, which resulted in the Washington Naval Treaty, all five of the *Virginia* class were decommissioned. The *Virginia* and the *New*

*Jersey* were used for target practice and sunk by Billy Mitchell's bombers off the East Coast. The *Georgia*, *Rhode Island*, and *Nebraska* on the West Coast were sold for salvage. The USS *Nebraska* was decommissioned November 9, 1923, and completely broken up for scrap by 1924.<sup>29</sup> It and the others of its class were magnificent failures, outmoded by technological advances before they were even in service, a situation that seems to occur frequently during arms races. They were never really used for their intended purposes, but perhaps they were a deterrent that helped keep America out of war on other occasions.

By World War II, the battleship as the ultimate strategic naval weapon had been replaced by the aircraft carrier, and today it is undoubtedly the missile-carrying nuclear submarine that is our "Big Stick." Such a ship, now under construction and scheduled for launching in 1990, will once again carry the name USS *Nebraska*.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John C. Reilly, Jr. and Robert Scheina, *American Battleships 1886-1923: Pre-dreadnought Design and Construction* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 136-38, 143-44.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 136, 141.

<sup>3</sup>Tony Gibbons, *The Complete Encyclopedia of Battleships* (New York: Salamander Books Ltd., 1983), 62.

<sup>4</sup>Reilly and Scheina, 141.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>Norma Kidd Green, "Launching of the Battleship Nebraska is Recalled," *Lincoln Sunday Journal*, June 29, 1941, D-3. Julia M. Savage, *Westward Ho!* (Lincoln: Woodruff-Collins Printing Company, 1902).

<sup>8</sup>Green, "Launching." "The Ship Nebraska Goes Down the Ways," *Lincoln Star*, October 7, 1904, 1.

<sup>9</sup>Gail DeBuse Potter, "The Silver Service for the USS *Nebraska*," *Nebraska History* 69 (Fall 1988), 115-19.

<sup>10</sup>"Nebraska Makes Excellent Time," *Lincoln Star*, July 3, 1906, 5.

<sup>11</sup>Reilly and Scheina, 135.

<sup>12</sup>"History of USS *Nebraska* (BB-14)," Ship's Histories Section, Division of Naval History, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Navy Department, April 9, 1958, 3.

<sup>13</sup>Antony Preston, *Battleships of World War I* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1972), 224-25.

<sup>14</sup>Reilly and Scheina, 143-44.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 144-47.

<sup>16</sup>"History of USS *Nebraska* (BB-14)," 3.

<sup>17</sup>Reilly and Scheina, 149-50.

<sup>18</sup>"Sheldon Tenders Silver Service," *Lincoln Star*, May 8, 1908, 12.

<sup>19</sup>Captain George R. Clark USN et al., *A Short History of the United States Navy* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott Company, 1916), 469-73.

<sup>20</sup>"Sheldon Tenders Silver Service."

<sup>21</sup>Reilly and Scheina, 151-55.

<sup>22</sup>"Secretary's Report for 1909," *Nebraska State Historical Society Publication* 18 (1917), 147-48.

<sup>23</sup>Reilly and Scheina, 10. Preston, 233.

<sup>24</sup>"History of USS *Nebraska* (BB-14)," 1.

<sup>25</sup>Donald W. Mitchell, *History of the Modern American Navy From 1883 Through Pearl Harbor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), 179-80.

<sup>26</sup>"History of USS *Nebraska* (BB-14)," 2.

<sup>27</sup>Preston, 225-26, 233.

<sup>28</sup>"History of USS *Nebraska* (BB-14)," 2.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*