

L'Hermione

building the Frigate of Liberty

Part 1

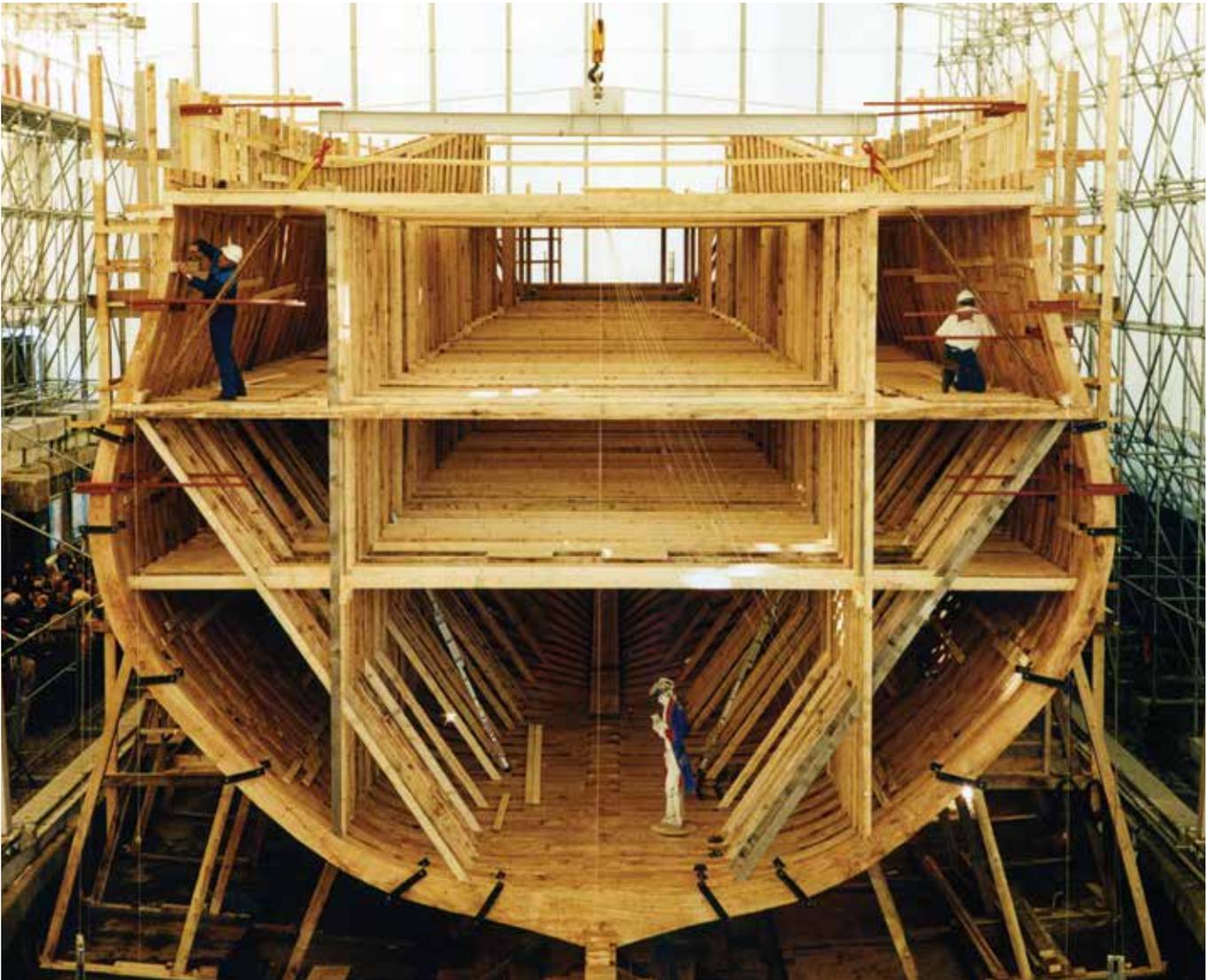


Photo 1. Construction begins.

Roger Marsh and Fiona Clark Echlin

We rarely have the opportunity to write about the building of a model to 1:1 scale and even less frequently about one which is a model of a large sailing ship, although one or two serious full-scale replicas have been covered in our 'Historic Ships' columns in the past.

This subject is particularly special as an eighteenth century frigate, a type of ship dear to the hearts of many of our readers. Furthermore, she is a frigate that has been built as closely as possible to the original constructional methods employed in the

1770s. But before describing the ship's building, we will look at the history of *l'Hermione* ('La Frégate de la Liberté' as she is called in France, 'The Frigate of Liberty') and her significance within the context of American history.

***L'Hermione* – history**

The original ship was designed by Henri Chevillard, and was part of a group of four fast, light frigates which included *la Concorde*, *la Courageuse* and *la Fée*. These were 32-gun

ships carrying a main battery of 26 twelve-pounder guns and a secondary armament of six 6-pounders on the upper decks (calibrated in old French pounds, which were approximately 7.9% heavier than British or American pounds). The French called the ships 'Frégates de 12'. These 'Concorde-Class' frigates (to use modern terminology) had a length of 44.20 m. between perpendiculars, with a maximum beam of 11.55 m., a draft of 5.78 m. and a displacement of 1082 tonnes, expressed in modern metric measurements.

Construction of the original *l'Hermione*

L'Hermione was built in Rochefort, on the Atlantic coast of France, taking just a year from the laying of her keel in 1778 to her launch on 28th April 1779.

French dockyard records for this period are relatively complete and show that her construction would have required 1160 cubic metres of oak and 205 of coniferous wood. Iron weighed in at 35.12 tonnes, lead at some 3.5 tonnes, pitch 1 tonne, tow 3 tonnes and hemp 15 tonnes. Interestingly, the labour requirements were also meticulously noted. Construction necessitated 22,000 man-days from the carpenters, 3,000 from the caulkers, 5,000 from blacksmiths, 1,010 from joiners, 4,000 from drillers and 189 from the trenaillers. The number of days of labour from the miserable 'forçats' of the bagne, the inmates of the local hard-labour penitentiary, is not recorded, but these would have been very many indeed.

Service history in the French Royal Navy

L'Hermione was commissioned in May 1779 under the command of Louis-René Levasseur Latouche-Tréville, later to become the Comte de Latouche. A Rochefort-born man himself, he subsequently became a noted admiral during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, even though aristocratic by birth. His achievements towards the end of his career included the repulse of Admiral Lord Nelson's attacks on Bonaparte's invasion fleet at Boulogne in 1801.

L'Hermione spent the first

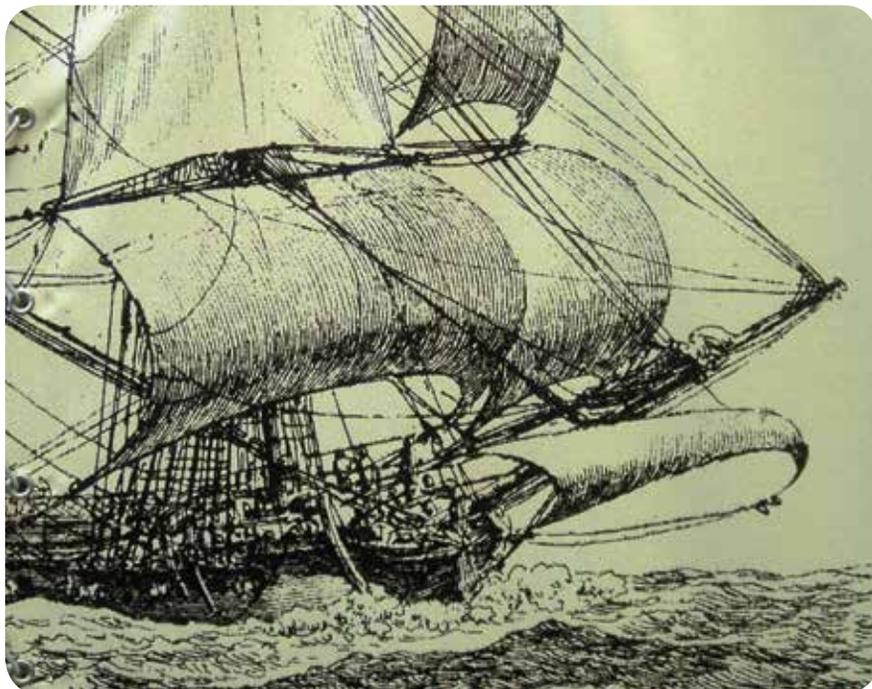


Figure 1. Drawing of *l'Hermione* at Rochefort display in 2003.



Figure 2. Rochefort in 1762, viewed from the Magasin des Colonies, oil by Joseph Vernet (1714-1789). Note the Corderie Royale at right. © Musée National de la Marine/A. Fux.

months of her career in French waters. She scored an almost immediate success on the 28th of that first month at sea, luring the 18-gun British privateer *Diffidence* into a night-time trap and capturing her in the morning. The next day another 18-gun privateer was similarly taken. Latouche-Tréville returned triumphantly to Rochefort with his two smaller prizes.

Lafayette

The most important task undertaken by *l'Hermione* during her career, and certainly the most significant in terms of the course of American history, was in carrying General Lafayette across the Atlantic to deliver to George Washington the vital news that crucial French reinforcements of troops and frigates had been approved by the French government in support of the nascent USA in its struggle for independence. Lafayette sailed on *l'Hermione* from Rochefort on 21st March 1780 and landed in Boston 38 days later, on 28th April.

The young, aristocratic Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier de la Fayette, Marquis de la Fayette, to give him his full name and title, had involved himself in the American Revolution as early as 1776, initially against the wishes of the French government and having been expressly forbidden by King Louis XVI to leave for America. He had nevertheless sailed secretly in April 1777, fought at the Battle of Brandywine, where he was wounded in the leg, and commanded American troops in a number of campaigns. The young man became firm friends with Washington, who, it is said, saw in him the son he himself never had.

Lafayette had returned to

Paris in 1779. France itself had officially entered the war on the American side during the previous year, 1778, so Lafayette's eventual arrival in Boston aboard *l'Hermione* in May 1780 was in the role of a returning hero.

The peak of his American military career was in commanding troops at Yorktown where the British general, Cornwallis, surrendered on 19th October 1781 to the combined American and French forces under the command of



Photo 2. The Comte de la Fayette, a striking historical figure constructed by George Stuart of California.

Washington and the Comte de Rochambeau. The British fleet under Rear Admiral Sir Thomas Graves had been denied entry to Chesapeake Bay by the French fleet of Amiral le Comte de Grasse six weeks earlier, on 5th September 1781, at the Battle of the Chesapeake (also known as the Battle of the Virginia Capes), so ensuring that the British forces at Yorktown could not be relieved by sea. Though only a tactical

draw in itself, as a fleet action, the Battle of the Chesapeake was, strategically, the most decisive battle of the war in its results which, in effect, decided the eventual outcome of the War of Independence in favour of the Americans, despite several significant British naval victories over French fleets in subsequent years.

Into action – a frigate duel

But to return to our ship. Having delivered Lafayette to Boston, *l'Hermione* put to sea again in a few days, on 2nd June 1780. Five days later, on the 7th June, *l'Hermione* fell in with the British frigate *Iris*, under Captain James Hawker, to the south of Long Island. *Iris* had formerly been the American Continental frigate *Hancock*, which had been captured by the British frigate *Rainbow* in 1777. Also a 12-pdr 32, *Iris* was of very similar size and power to the French frigate.

Latouche-Tréville and Hawker exchanged a fierce cannonade for an hour and a half, during which Latouche-Tréville took a musket ball in the arm, before *Iris* hauled her wind and parted company. *L'Hermione* was unable to follow, her rigging having been much damaged in the fight. An acrimonious published debate between the two opposing captains followed, over who broke off the action or fled the scene of battle.

A fleet battle

L'Hermione was present as one of three supporting frigates in the fleet of Amiral Destouches at the Battle of Cape Henry on 16th March 1781, a clash between seven French ships of the line and a British fleet of eight under Vice Admiral Arbuthnot near the mouth of the Chesapeake. It is sometimes



Figure 3. *L'Hermione* in action on 21st July 1781 off Cape Breton against a British convoy, oil on canvas by Auguste-Louis de Rossel de Cergy (1736-1804). Note the Royal (Bourbon) French white ensign.

called, by the French, 'The First Battle of the Chesapeake'. Interestingly, *l'Hermione's* old adversary, *Iris*, was one of four supporting frigates with the British fleet on that day. Though indecisive, with no ships lost on either side, Arbuthnot outsailed and outmanoeuvred Detouches, gaining entry to Chesapeake Bay and protecting the bay for the expected arrival of reinforcements of land troops to join Arnold's forces. This British success also frustrated the movement of troops under the Marquis de Lafayette, who turned back north to rejoin Washington – all in all, a very different strategic result from the later, much larger battle on 5th September the same year between the fleets of Graves and the Comte de Grasse, mentioned above. As was customary in fleet actions, the frigates did not engage on either side.

Entertaining Congress

In May 1781, anchored at Philadelphia, *l'Hermione*

received on board and entertained the entire Continental Congress, which was then based in that city.

A convoy action

A brisk little action took place on 21st July 1781 off Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, between two French frigates and five smaller British warships, which were escorting nine colliers en

route to Spanish River to pick up coal for return to Halifax, as well as four other merchantmen. The French frigates were *l'Hermione*, still under the command of Latouche-Tréville, and *l'Astrée*, 38, commanded by the Comte de Lapérouse, a commander who was to become celebrated as a Pacific explorer but was eventually lost with his 1785



Figure 4. Captain Latouche-Tréville of *l'Hermione*. Litho by Antoine Maurin (1793-1860).

expedition. The French frigates captured two of the smaller British warships and three merchantmen. The remaining escorts nevertheless succeeded in taking the surviving convoy north



Figure 5. 'Action off Louisbourg', 1781, attributed to A. L. de Rossel de Cergy (1736-1804), oil of 1788. © Musée National de la Marine/A. Fux.



Photo 3. Fine 1:36 model of *l'Hermione* on display adjacent to the dock.

to Spanish River, where they picked up a cargo of coal and delivered it to Halifax. This clash is often called 'The Naval Action off Louisbourg', though in fact it took place some way from that town.

A Passage to India

L'Hermione returned to France in early 1782. She was assigned to a squadron sent to India to join the great Amiral de Suffren's command, still in confrontation with the doughty Admiral Hughes, but on the conclusion of peace between France and Great Britain she sailed back to France in 1784.

The loss of *l'Hermione* in the French National Navy

The frigate again saw brief service at the start of the French Revolutionary War, and was despatched to escort a convoy carrying ordnance. However, *l'Hermione* was lost on 20th

September 1793 by running aground on the reefs off the town of Croisic, in the Atlantic Guérande peninsula, not far from her home port of Rochefort. The doomed ship sank slowly, and her crew and much of her equipment

were recovered. The subsequent court-martial found that her loss was due to pilot error and exonerated her Captain Martin from blame.

Rochefort and the new *Hermione*

Rochefort was, in essence, a new city built at a site on the Charente river chosen in 1665 by Louis XIV's finance minister, Colbert, as a new arsenal and port for the French Royal Navy. Its Royal Ropeworks building (La Corderie Royale) was erected between 1666 and 1669 and was at that time the longest building in Europe. Drydocks were also constructed. The port's fortifications were designed by the great military architect Vauban.

Up to 8000 people were employed at the Naval Arsenal at the time of the city's heyday during the 18th Century. By the 20th Century, however, Rochefort was in decline, and the decision to close the Arsenal itself was taken in 1927. The city and the Corderie Royale



Photo 4. Bows of *l'Hermione*, a fine rigged and canvassed model. Photo as in 2003.



Photo 5. With her launch and masting completed, the new *Hermione* awaits her topsail and topgallant yards and completion of her rigging, in the Spring of 2013.



Photo 6. Aerial view of the superb Corderie Royale, on the banks of the Gironde.

were subsequently damaged by German occupation forces during WWII.

***L'Hermione* reborn**

One of the projects launched to regenerate the city, to attract tourism and to bring employment to Rochefort was the plan to build a replica 18th Century warship in the historic arsenal, and what better subject could there be than the frigate which was built there and carried Lafayette to America in 1780? Without describing all the political and financial elements surrounding this initiative, the Association Hermione-La Fayette was founded in 1993 to oversee and manage the project. After years of planning, the keel of the new *Hermione* was laid in 1997 in one of Rochefort's original 17th Century docks, which was temporarily roofed over to shelter the work in progress. The vessel was launched on July 6th, 2012, has since been masted and sparred and is still being fitted out as we go to press.

A voyage to America

It has always been planned to recreate Lafayette's historic voyage on completion of the frigate, and it has been confirmed that sufficient finance is now in place to achieve this. In the Spring of next year *L'Hermione* will sail from Rochefort to US

ports which will include Annapolis, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York and Boston, so a number of our readers will, no doubt, have the opportunity of seeing this fine ship in 2015 and going aboard her. For updates on the planned schedule and dates, readers can keep their eyes on <http://www.hermione.com/en/home/> (the English language version of the Association Hermione-La Fayette's website) and on their American site at <http://www.hermione2015.com/>



Building a 1: 1 replica frigate

We shall be bringing you several installments, over our forthcoming issues, covering the design and building of this superb replica frigate, before we take you on board the completed ship in our final chapter.

Photo credits:

Photos 1 and 5 by kind courtesy of Association Hermione-La Fayette. Figure 1 is author's photo of display by l'Association Hermione-La Fayette at Rochefort in 2003. Photo 2: Historical Figure by George Stuart (www.galleryhistoricalfigures.com), photo by Peter D'Aprix (<http://www.peterdaprix.com/>), by courtesy of Museum of Ventura County (<http://venturamuseum.org/>). Figures 2, 3 and 5 with thanks to the Musée Nationale de la Marine, Paris. Photos 3 and 4 by Roger Marsh. Photo 6: Club Innovation & Culture CLIC France.