

The Sale of ex-US Warships to Canada in 1930-31

By Dr David Chessum

The Washington Naval Treaty, signed on 6 February 1922, was a disarmament treaty intended to reduce and ultimately limit the naval strength of the major naval powers of the day – the United States, the British Empire, Japan, France, and Italy. In order to prevent signatories from getting around the disarmament provisions by transferring surplus warships to friendly nations outside of the Treaty regime, the Treaty contained the provision that “Each of the Contracting Powers undertakes not to dispose by gift, sale or any mode of transfer of any vessel of war in such a manner that such vessel may become a vessel of war in the navy of any foreign Power.” In 1930-31, plans by a US company to sell two former US Navy warships to an American Company operating in Canada created a test-case that limited how broadly that treaty prohibition could be interpreted.

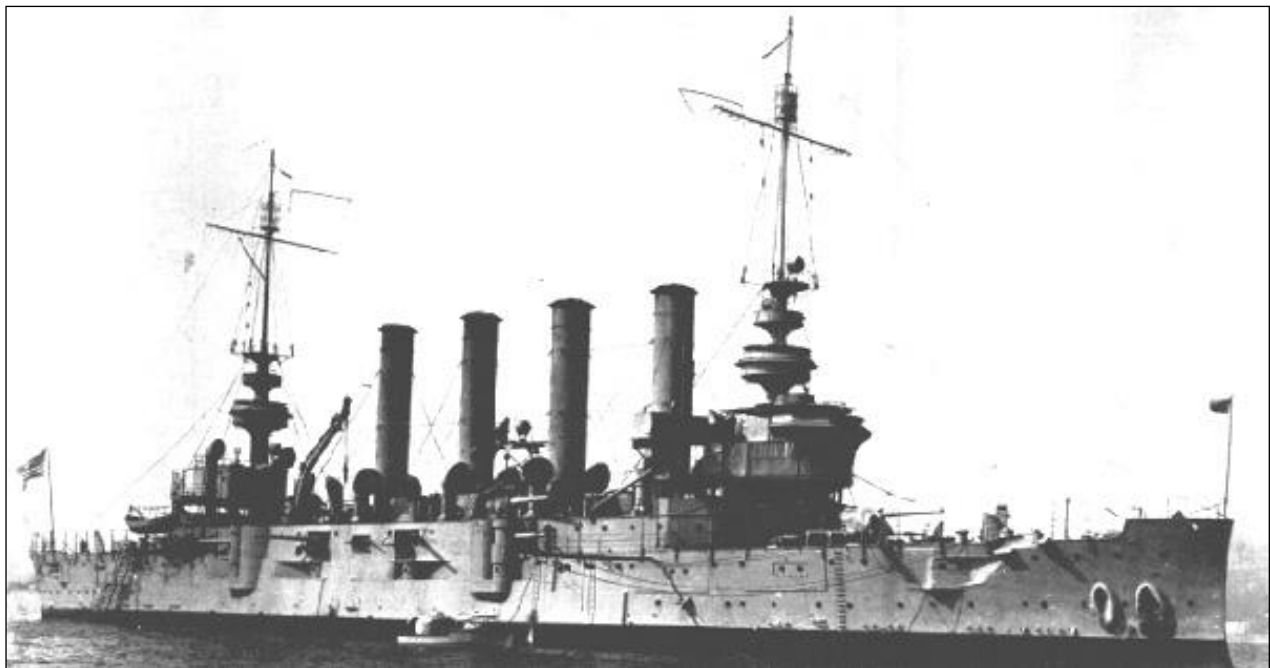


Fig 1: USS *Charleston*. Public Domain. Photo Credit: US Navy

USS *Charleston* was a 9,700-ton *St Louis*-class protected cruiser completed in 1905. After active service in World War One, *Charleston* was decommissioned on 4 December 1923, and sold in February 1930 to Abe Goldberg of Seattle for scrapping by the Lake Union Dry Dock and Machine Works. USS *South Dakota* was a 13,680-ton *Pennsylvania*-class armoured cruiser completed in 1908. Renamed USS *Huron* on 7 June 1920 to release its original name for a new battleship, the vessel was struck from the Navy list on 15 November 1929, and also sold to Abe Goldberg & Co on 11 February 1930 for disposal.

On 15 August 1930, the American *Charge d’Affaires* in Tokyo advised the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs that it was proposed that *Charleston*’s hulk be on-sold to the Powell River Company, Limited, an American Company operating in Canada. At the time of the proposal, all of *Charleston*’s armour plate had been removed, along with the engines, boilers, and generators, and the superstructure was being dismantled. On 30 August 1930, the Japanese Minister for Foreign Affairs replied that the Japanese Government had no

objection to this proposed sale. On 25 October 1930, the hulk of *Charleston*, cut down to the waterline, was towed to the log pond at the Powell River pulp mill in British Columbia to act as a part of a floating breakwater.

On 1 July 1931, the US Government advised the other Treaty signatories of the desire by the Powell River Co to purchase the former USS *Huron* as well. At this time *Huron* had been reduced to the condition of an empty shell, and it was asserted that there could be no practicable possibility of it being incorporated into the navy of a foreign power. This argument was accepted by the other signatories to the Washington Naval Treaty, who each replied that they had no objections to the sale. *Huron* joined *Charleston* in the breakwater in August 1931.

On 18 February 1961, *Huron* sank in a storm. That same year, *Charleston*'s hull was removed from the floating breakwater because it was also in danger of sinking, and moved to the booming ground at Kelsey Bay on Vancouver Island where it was grounded as part of another breakwater. The remains of the hulk are still there.

Endnotes

1. Washington Naval Treaty, article XVIII, accessed October 24, 2020, <https://naval-arms-control-archive.site123.me/documents/washington-naval-treaty-1922>.
2. *Charleston II (C-2)*, June 30, 2015, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/c/charleston-ii.html>
3. JA Campbell, *Hulks: The Breakwater Ships of Powell River* (Powell River: Works Publishing, 2003), 12.
4. *South Dakota I (Armored Cruiser No. 9)*, March 26, 2015, http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/s15/south_dakota-i.htm. "Navy Sells Six Old Cruisers and a Tug for \$286,707," *New York Times*, February 6, 1930, 1.
5. Treaty Division, Department of State, *Treaty Information Bulletin* No. 12, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1930), 5.
6. "Powers asked to authorize resale of cruiser, but Seattle buyer has begun to scrap vessel," *New York Times*, August 21, 1930, 1.
7. Treaty Information Bulletin No. 12, 5.
8. USS *Charleston* C-22, accessed February 2, 2011, http://freepages.military.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~cacunithistories/USS_Charleston.html.
9. Treaty Division, Department of State, *Treaty Information Bulletin* No. 21, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1931), 5.
10. Campbell, *Hulks*, 15.
11. *ibid.*
12. *ibid.*, 13.
13. USS *Charleston* C-22.

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