

Replica of 18th century ship tests French waters

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Cheered by tens of thousands, a life-size replica of the *Hermione*, the French navy frigate that shipped General Lafayette to America to rally rebels fighting British troops in the US war of independence, began its maiden voyage on Sunday.

Spectators lined the port in Rochefort in southwestern France to see the reproduced vessel, which took 17 years to build, set sail.

A cannon boomed as the ship passed the arsenal at Rochefort, as spectators applauded wildly and sailors gathered on its deck cried "Hurrah!"

The *Hermione* was accompanied by 120 boats. She will sail up the Charente river to Rochefort's commercial port. From there, the frigate will head to the Atlantic Ocean island of Aix for several weeks of sea trials.

The vessel will make a public stop in Bordeaux in October before returning to its home port a month later for final preparations.

The 65-metre (210 feet) ship is due to set sail for the United States in April 2015, following the route from Rochefort to Boston made by French General Gilbert du Motier—the Marquis de Lafayette—in 1780 to bolster American revolutionaries in their fight against British troops.

Sunday's launch is a major milestone in the journey undertaken by a

group of restoration enthusiasts who in 1997 embarked on the arduous task of recreating the three-masted vessel using only eighteenth-century shipbuilding techniques.

'An important step'

"It is an important step to sail Hermione at sea, which no one has ever done," said Benedict Donnelly, president of the Hermione-Lafayette Association.

"We were often told that it wouldn't work. But we have always said that she will cross the Atlantic and we are going to do just that," he added.

"It's all very impressive," said a man watching Sunday's launch. "We will continue to follow her adventures."

Since its foundation the association has attracted artisan craftsmen from France, Britain, Germany, Spain and Sweden and now comprises some 8,000 members.

"There is real pride in the collective force behind this project. There have been tense moments, but we remained united," Donnelly said.

The project cost 25 million euros (\$32 million), financed by more than four million visitors to the shipyard—also home to Rochefort's original arsenal—as well as through crowd-funding initiatives for specific parts of the ship.

Yann Cariou, the ex-naval officer who will captain the frigate for its voyage to Boston, said the next weeks of testing would give the 72-strong crew a chance to "get their sea legs".

"Above all there will be emotion. It's still the Hermione and nobody has

navigated a ship like this for two centuries," Cariou said.

It took Lafayette 38 days to cross the Atlantic, a voyage that confirmed his renown as a military mastermind and a hero of the American Revolution.

Lafayette's noble charm and strategic genius during the American revolutionary war have earned him the honour of having at least 42 US counties and cities and hundreds of streets and squares—including Lafayette Square opposite the White House—named after him or his ancestral home in France, La Grange.

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