

Zebulon B. Vance, USS ^[1]

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by Harry S. Warren, 2006



The USS Zebulon B. Vance being launched on December 6, 1941. Image from the Cape Fear Museum.

^[2]The USS *Zebulon B. Vance* was launched in [Wilmington](#) ^[3] on 6 Dec. 1941, one day before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. At the ceremony, North Carolina governor [J. Melville Broughton](#) ^[4] proclaimed, "As we salute this ship and launch it today, we shall have a proud part in the overthrow of the aggressor who seeks to dominate the entire world." A few minutes later he and 13,000 other North Carolinians watched the ship splash into the [Cape Fear River](#) ^[5].

Named for the state's legendary [Civil War](#) ^[6] and [Reconstruction](#) ^[7] governor ^[8], the *Vance* represented the first of 125 [Liberty ships](#) ^[9] built in Wilmington during [World War II](#) ^[10]. The [North Carolina Shipbuilding Company](#) ^[11], a subsidiary of [Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company](#) ^[12], began constructing a shipyard on the Cape Fear River's east side in February 1941. In 1944 the Truman Committee (created to study defense-related contracts) reported that the North Carolina yard produced vessels at "the lowest average cost per ship . . . of any of the 16 yards building Liberty ships in 1943."

The *Vance* measured 441.5 feet long and was 56 feet wide at the beam. Its gross tonnage of 7,177 drew 27 feet of water; powered by a 2,500-HP engine, the *Vance* could reach a running speed of 11 to 14 knots. The ship had quarters for 44 officers and enlisted men but "none for passengers." Construction costs were estimated at \$1.5 million.

For most of the war the *Vance* served as a freighter. It survived floating mines and a near miss by a torpedo and took part in the invasion of North Africa. Near the war's end the *Vance* was converted into a hospital ship and renamed the USS *John J. Meany*. After the war it was transferred to the Army Transportation Corps and once again named the *Zebulon B. Vance*. The vessel was used to convey British and other war brides to the United States.

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Additional Resources:

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Image Credits:

Pennington, James C. ("Skinny"). "Launching of the Zebulon B. Vance by Pennington's Flying Service December 6, 1941." Wilmington, N.C. December 6, 1941. University of North Carolina Wilmington's William M. Randall Library and the Cape Fear Museum. <http://library.uncw.edu/capefearww2/veWebDailyLife/exhibit5/e50004a.htm> ^[16] (accessed October 11, 2012).

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