

American Field Trip:

The U.S.S. Constitution— Charlestown, Mass.

by Brian C. Baur



Cannon firing from the U.S.S. Constitution

Following the Revolutionary War, the newly independent United States of America discovered that her future security demanded that she conduct commerce and trade with the rest of the world, and especially in the Mediterranean regions.

But like other nations, the merchant ships of the U.S. were vulnerable to attack and capture by Barbary Pirates off North Africa. The pirates' faster Corsair ships easily overtook foreign merchant ships and captured them, enslaving their crews and demanding that tribute be paid in order to insure that future ships would go unmolested through the Barbary waters.

For many years several nations, including the United States, paid this 'protection money' to the Barbary Pirates. But payment didn't insure much, and merchant ships from the U.S. were still regularly set upon.

Recognizing the threat to not only the lives of American citizens on these ships, but also to the economy of the country, President George Washington asked Congress to consider building a national Navy to protect merchant ships and U.S. interests throughout the world.

On March 27, 1794, the U.S. Congress passed such a bill, establishing the United States Navy, and calling for the building of a fleet of naval ships. Later that year the keel was laid for a ship designed by Joshua Humphreys and Josiah Fox. The design called for the ship to be powerful enough to defeat any enemy vessel of the same size, and fast enough to outrun any stronger opponents.

The ship was built at Edmond Hart's shipyard in Boston, Massachusetts. The keel, the backbone on which the rest of the ship rests, was made from white oak. Its remarkably thick hull is comprised of a white oak/live oak/white oak sandwich design that at some points is 24 inches thick. This combination worked to actually repel shot. The rest

of the ship was constructed with wood coming from states ranging from Georgia to Maine.

The frigate was 204 feet in length and its displacement was 2,200 tons. Her foremast height was 198 feet, her mizzenmast height was 172 feet 6 inches, and her mainmast height was 220 feet. She had 42,710 square feet of sail area, and a speed of 13+ knots. The ship was manned by a crew of nearly 500 men, and her armaments included twenty 32-pound cannonades with a range of 400 yards, and thirty two unwieldy 5,600-pound long guns that could hurl a 24-pound shot almost a mile, and took from eight to twelve men to operate.



Cannon on deck

The ship was named *U.S.S. Constitution*, and the frigate was launched as one of the first six ships of the new United States Navy on October 21, 1797. Among her innovations were diagonal wooden riders placed in the hull. These large lengths of wood were set in the hull at strategic points to transfer weight evenly along the keel to prevent it from warping. Her total cost was \$302,718.

In 1801, the Barbary States of Morocco, Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli were still demanding payments from the United States. President Thomas Jefferson decided that the U.S. would no longer make tribute payments, a fact that annoyed the Bashaw of Tripoli so much that he had the flagstaff at the American consulate cut down May 10, 1801, and declared war on the United States.

The *U.S.S. Constitution* was named as Commodore Edward Preble's flagship in the Mediterranean in 1803, when American forces set up a blockade of the port of Tripoli and bombarded fortifications and gunboats there. The ship was sent to Lisbon for repairs and to enlist more men before returning to the blockade. On June 3, 1805, a peace treaty was signed aboard the frigate which ended tribute payments to Tripoli and secured the release of all American captives.

In 1806, France and Great Britain were at war, with each nation trying to prevent neutral nations like the United States with trading with their enemy. U.S. trade was terribly compromised and an agreement with Napoleon was finally made. U.S. sanctions against Britain continued, however, fueled by anti-British feeling in the U.S.

Americans in the early 1800s were weary of continued British meddling in their affairs, which culminated in the British support of the Indians during the Battle of Tippecanoe on November 7, 1811. Although William Henry Harrison defeated the Shawnee tribe led by Tecumseh during that battle, the U.S. government felt that Britain's support of the Indians was hindering U.S. expansion.

A war with England was ill advised at the time, since the U.S. had a Navy of about twenty ships, while England had hundreds. Yet the United States did declare war on England on June 18, 1812.

By July 5th, the *Constitution* was on her way to join Commodore John Rodgers near New York. On July 16th, the *Constitution* sighted four ships off Egg Harbor, New Jersey that Captain Isaac Hull thought was Rodgers squadron. Shortly after a fifth ship was spotted. Hull decided that they were all British war ships, and he turned his vessel away from the coast to gain maneuvering room.



Capt. Isaac Hull

Thus began a cat and mouse game between the *Constitution* and the British ships that would show off the maneuverability and seamanship of the American frigate and her crew. Several times the British thought themselves within firing range and opened their guns on the *Constitution*. They were amazed to see their shots fall short and the American vessel maneuver into a position to fire back.

On July 18, Captain Hull spotted an American merchant ship. But the British had also spotted the ship, and hoisted up American flags in an attempt to fool her and get her to come close enough to be captured. Hull retaliated by hoisting up a British Flag on his ship and heading speedily toward the merchant ship, successfully scaring it away from imminent capture.

As the British ships continued to pursue the *Constitution*, the American frigate continued to out run, out maneuver, and out think them at every turn.

With a six-mile buffer between his ship and the British, Hull noticed a small squall line ahead of him. He quickly ordered his men to start taking in the sails as quickly as possible so that the British would see they were in a panic about the storm. To the British, it seemed as if the Americans were preparing to be hit by a squall of great intensity. They soon began taking in sails and getting ready for the storm as well.

As the rather ordinary rainstorm passed over the *Constitution*, the rain obscured her from the view of the British and Hull quickly reset his sails and sped off. The British had been fooled completely, and within an hour had fallen so far back that they could no longer be seen from the *Constitution*.

By dawn on July 19th, the British ships were twelve miles behind, but Captain Hull was still taking every advan-

tage he could. In the early morning he had his crew wet the sails with seawater brought aboard with fire pumps, and was constantly adjusting the sails to gain as much speed as possible. Shortly after 8:00 a.m. the British gave up the chase, and changed course.

Captain Hull and his crew had only been together for seven days, but for the last 57 hours, they had demonstrated unity, endurance, and American seamanship to the British. It would not be the last time they would prove a match for the British.

On August 19, 1812, southeast of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the *Constitution* sighted a sail on the horizon and made for it with all her sails set. The ship proved to be the *HMS Guerriere*, a 38-gun frigate that was one of the five ships that had pursued the *Constitution* in July.

This time Captain Hull would not be the pursued. He ordered his men to make for the British ship. The British opened fire while the *Constitution* was still far astern, but the Americans kept bearing down on them. As she came upon the British frigate, the *Guerriere* fired her guns to no avail. The solid construction of the *Constitution* caused the British shot to simply bounce off the outside planking and drop harmlessly into the sea. An unknown sailor on the great ship was heard to exclaim "Huzzah! Her sides are made of iron." Thus was born the nickname "Old Ironsides."

As the ships came abreast of one another, the *Constitution* opened fire with Hull's command "Now, boys, pour into her!" Within 20 minutes the *Guerriere's* aft mast went over. As the American frigate passed ahead, she sent a raking broadside crashing down on the enemy deck, cutting away much of her rigging and felling her fore and main masts.

When the ships separated, the *Guerriere* was left broken and helpless and was forced to surrender. In the 35-minute battle she had lost 78 men killed or wounded, while the Americans lost only 14. This short but decisive battle transformed the United States from a fledgling nation to a world-class power.

The *USS Constitution* was involved in her final great battle on February 20, 1815, when Captain Charles Stewart spotted two British ships off the island of Madeira. Stewart skillfully maneuvered the American frigate, preventing the two British ships from overpowering him. After four hours the British ships surrendered.

By 1830, the *USS Constitution* was in poor shape and



"Old Ironsides" engages and defeats the *Guerriere*

deemed unseaworthy. The great ship was destined for the scrap heap when a poem entitled "Old Ironsides" by Oliver Wendell Homes, Sr., aroused public sentiment for saving her. Money was provided by the U.S. Congress to save and restore the ship in 1833.

During the years 1835 to 1855, the *Constitution* made several voyages. In 1844-45 she made a two-year voyage around the world, covering 52,279 miles at sea in 495 days. In 1849, she docked in Naples, Italy, where Pope Pius IX paid a visit.

During and after the Civil War, the *Constitution* was used as a training ship at the U.S. Naval Academy. In 1878 she made her final trip abroad carrying exhibits from the U.S. to the Universal Exposition in Paris. In December 1881, she was retired to life as a Navy receiving ship in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

The *USS Constitution* was largely forgotten for many years until a Massachusetts state senator by the name of John "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald, grandfather to future U.S. President John F. Kennedy, headed an effort to save the regal old ship in 1897 and return her to her birthplace of Boston. Being one of the first ships of the United States Navy, and one responsible for helping make the nation a world power, Fitzgerald thought the ship a national treasure.

In the latter years of the 1920s the *Constitution* underwent major restoration, funded in part by the American people, and especially the school children of the nation, who raised pennies for the venerable old frigate.

The ship, restored to her greatness, was taken from Boston on July 2, 1931 on a tour of the East, West and Gulf Coasts, where she was also taken through the Panama Canal. The ship traveled more than 22,000 miles and visited 75 ports of call during the trip. She was returned to her berth in Boston on May 7, 1934.

Old Ironsides is the oldest commissioned warship still afloat in the world. She is now berthed just a mere stone's throw from where she was originally launched in 1797. She is open to the public and receives untold thousands of visitors every year.

In October of 1997, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the *Constitution*, the ship, once again refurbished and restored, took to sea under her own power for the first time in 116 years, thrilling those present.

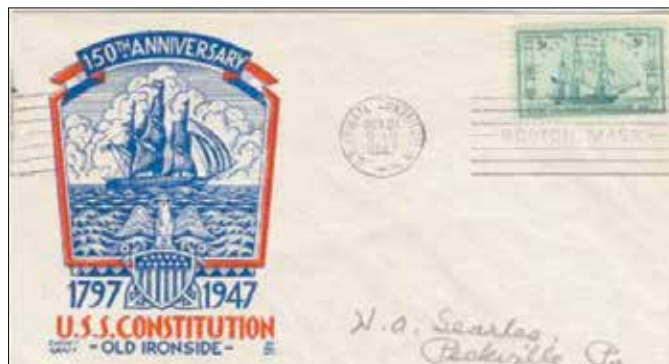


Constitution under sail, 1997

The United States celebrated the 150th anniversary of the launching of the *USS Constitution* by issuing a single blue-green three-cent stamp in 1947. The stamp was designed by Andrew H. Hepburn, and was based on a Naval architect's drawing of the frigate. The stamp was printed on a rotary press in sheets of 200 stamps that were broken down into four panes of 50 stamps each (Scott 951).

The *Constitution* stamp was issued in Boston on October 21, 1947, where 683,416 first day covers were serviced. Oddly, the U.S. did not issue a stamp to celebrate the bicentennial of the Constitution in 1997.

The *USS Constitution* is open for public visitation and viewing year round at the Charlestown Navy Yard, located at



U.S.S. Constitution issue Cachet Craft FDC

1 Constitution Road, in Charlestown, Massachusetts. Hours are daily from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. during the summer, and 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. during the winter. Tours take place every 30 minutes. There is no charge for visiting the ship, the tours, or any special events that may be taking place in connection with the ship. For more information on visiting the *Constitution*, as well as driving directions to the Navy Yard from many Massachusetts locations, visit the Old Ironsides website at www.oldironsides.com.



"Old Ironsides" at the Charlestown Navy Yard

Be advised that all visitors are required to go through a strict security screening process to insure the safety of the ship, crew and fellow visitors. All visitors, their bags and possessions, will be thoroughly checked, and it is wise to allow at least 30 extra minutes to get through the security line.