

## **The United States Ship Constitution**

The phrase “Wooden Ships and Iron Men” came into prominence during the 1800s, at a time when the wooden sailing men-of-war were rapidly being replaced by coal burning iron ships. The phrase serves to remind us of that long past era of almost 300 years where sailing warships formed the backbone of all major navies. With the advent of steam power and explosive shells that style of naval power faded like wooden dinosaurs. Only a handful of preserved relics exist today, namely the H.M.S. Victory in England and the U.S.S. Constitution attest to the fact that they ever existed at all.

The U.S.S. Constitution was developed and built in response to the threat of Barbary corsairs, which threatened American merchant shipping off northern coast of North Africa. In 1794, President Washington signed the Naval Armament Act calling for the construction of six frigates to be built at shipyards along the eastern seaboard. The 44-gun (although it usually carried more) U.S.S. Constitution was built in Boston and launched on Oct. 21, 1797.

Following the American Revolution, the United States was a neutral and successful maritime trading party with England and France. As Napoleon rose to power, Great Britain began imposed embargoes and trade restrictions on America’s merchant fleet to limit trade with France. Desperate for sailors to man her 600-ship fleet, British ships impressed (kidnapped) more than 5,000 American sailors suspected of being former English subjects and forced them to serve aboard her ships.

As many Americans rallied around the slogan “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights,” President James Madison declared war on England on June 18, 1812.

The first frigate action of the War of 1812 was fought on August 19, 1812 between the American U.S.S. Constitution, commanded by Isaac Hull, and the 38-gun H.M.S. Guerriere commanded by James Dacres. The Guerriere was returning to Halifax for repairs when she was intercepted. Firing first, the Guerriere broadsides bounced ineffectively off the Constitution’s hull giving rise to the famous nickname “Old Ironsides.” The Constitution’s return fire was much more devastating and reduced the Guerriere to a mastless hulk. She struck her colors in less than a half hour’s fighting.

Four months after her victory over the Guerriere, while patrolling the South American Coast, the Constitution chanced upon another British frigate, the 38-gun H.M.S. Java. After two hours of fighting, involving mostly rakes (broadships fired down the length of the enemy ship), by the Constitution, the Java surrendered with all her masts destroyed. British admiralty then declared that no engagement should take place with US ships unless a 2-1 advantage was held.

Three years later, and incidentally, 3 days after the official end of the War of 1812, the British 24-gun sloops Cyane and Levant fell prey to the Constitution off of Madiera, Spain. The Cyane was brought back to the United States and became the U.S.S. Cyane.

When the war ended the U.S.S. Constitution was among the 22 commissioned warships of the United States’ 18-year-old Navy, compared to more than 80 British vessels on station off America’s eastern seaboard in 1812. While the American fleet boasted many successes during the War of 1812, their actions had little impact on the outcome of the war.

“Objective analysis of the War of 1812 must conclude that the victories of Constitution ... had no direct effect on the course of the war,” explained Tyrone G. Martin in his history of U.S.S. Constitution, *A Most Fortunate Ship*. “The losses suffered by the Royal Navy were no more than pinpricks to the great fleet: they neither inspired its battle readiness nor disrupted the blockade of American ports... What the Constitution did accomplish was to uplift American morale spectacularly and, in the process, end forever the myth that the Royal Navy was invincible.”

Throughout the next four decades following the War of 1812, the U.S.S. Constitution secured numerous bloodless victories until she was taken out of active service in 1855.

**Side note: War of 1812 Battle Streamers:**



This battle streamer recognizes 14 significant actions by the U.S. Navy during the War of 1812 (3 of which the U.S.S. Constitution was involved). It is one of 28 authorized to be affixed to the military flags of the United States as colorful symbols and reminders the decisive influence of sea power. Stars on the Navy streamers follow the practice initiated during the World War II period-- that is, a bronze star for each action, and a silver star in lieu of five bronze stars.

**Mayflower I**

Built in 1607, the original *Mayflower* that sailed to Plymouth in 1620 no longer exists and our last record of her existence in 1624 as a potential for scrap sale. People have claims of holding pieces of this ship but without validation.

**Mayflower II**

Plimoth Plantation's full-scale reproduction, *Mayflower II*, was built in Devon, England and crossed the Atlantic in 1957. The modern recreation, from the solid oak timbers and tarred hemp rigging to the wood and horn lanterns and hand-colored maps, have been carefully re-created to give you a sense of what the original 17th-century vessel was like. Unlike the original vessel, a staircase to the main deck (instead of ladders) and electric lighting have been added.

Other Sources:

Official US Navy website: <http://www.history.navy.mil/USsconstitution/links.html> with physical address of USS CONSTITUTION, Bldg. 5, Charlestown Navy Yard, Charlestown, MA 02129.

Taylor, S. Craig. *Wooden Ships and Iron Men, Naval Warfare During the Age of Fighting Sail*, Avalon Hill Game Company, Baltimore, MD, 1975.

Smithsonian Institution Affiliated website: <http://www.plimoth.org/what-see-do/mayflower-ii> with physical address of Plimoth Plantation 137 Warren Avenue Plymouth, MA 02360