

This Day in History... March 27, 1794

Creation of Permanent U.S. Navy

On March 27, 1794, Congress passed the Naval Act, creating America's permanent naval force.

The predecessor of the US Navy, the Continental Navy, was established on October 13, 1775. Due to limited funds and manpower, the initial naval force was mostly merchantmen. Warships were built later during the Revolutionary War, but few major battles were fought at sea. (There were a number of battles, though, particularly John Paul Jones's capture of a British vessel that made him a naval hero.)

The navy's primary purpose was to intercept British shipping to the colonies and generally disrupt their operations. However, several men earned much-needed experience that would later be put to use with the creation of the permanent navy.

In 1785, after the Revolutionary War ended, the new American government needed funds, so the Continental navy was disbanded and the only remaining ship was auctioned.

America had no navy for the next five years (though the Revenue Marine was founded in 1790). In 1785, two American merchant ships were captured by Algiers. In response Thomas Jefferson, America's minister to France, began pushing for an American navy to protect such ships as they passed through the Mediterranean.

Initially, Jefferson's calls went unheeded. Then Congress and the Senate considered various proposals for a naval force in 1786 and 1791, but no progress was made. It wasn't until Algiers captured 11 more merchant ships in 1793 that American politicians began to seriously consider the importance of establishing a permanent naval force.

On January 20, 1794, the House of Representatives received a bill calling for the construction of four 44-gun ships and two 36-gun ships. The bill would allow for the ships to be constructed or bought. It also allowed for the payment of naval officers and sailors to man each ship.

Stamp shows the First Navy Jack, which flew during the Revolutionary War. (This statement is based on tradition, but historical evidence indicates this flag was not the real first Navy jack.)

Many in the House opposed the bill. But they agreed to pass it if a clause was added: if peace was established with Algiers, construction on the ships would stop.

No peace was established and matters at sea continued to grow uneasy. Pirates saw American merchants as easy targets without the protection of the Royal Navy they once had. Even the British began to interrupt American ships. Soon America's politicians realized that they needed to protect American interests at sea. On March 27, 1794, Congress passed the Act to Provide a Naval Armament, reactivating and establishing a permanent navy.

However, as some had previously suggested, America entered into a peace agreement with Algiers. So construction on all six ships was halted in March 1796. Lengthy debates and ensued, but President George Washington convinced Congress of their importance. That April, Congress passed a new act, allowing just three of those ships to finish construction: the *United States*, *Constellation*, and *Constitution*. Two years later, when France began to capture American merchant ships, Congress approved the completion of the other three ships, the *President*, *Congress*, and *Chesapeake*. The Quasi-War with France was fought mostly at sea. Soon, many were concerned that the War Department couldn't handle the expanding responsibilities of the Navy. On April 30, 1798, the Department of the Navy was established.

Department of the Navy Official Stamp

The Navy has continued to play an important role in every war in which the US has participated. It has modernized with the times – developing larger, faster, and more powerful ships, and adding air crews with the advent of flight. It's one of the largest and most powerful navies in the world, and has the largest aircraft carrier fleet in the world.



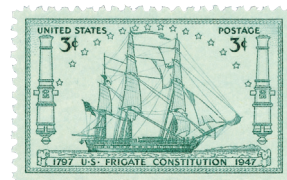
Issued to honor the Navy's role in World War II.



1975 Bicentennial stamp honoring the Continental Navy



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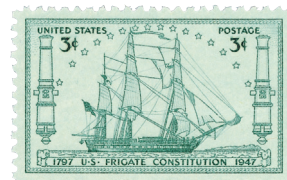
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