

This Day in History... August 19, 1812

USS *Constitution* Earns Much-Needed American Victory At Sea

On August 19, 1812, the USS *Constitution* dueled with the British HMS *Guerriere* and reigned victorious.

In the late 18th century, North African pirates were wreaking havoc on the United States' international shipping trade. American vessels were routinely seized in the Mediterranean Sea and their crews and cargo held for ransom. The fledgling nation established its own navy in 1794, and a fleet of warships was commissioned to protect the seafaring merchants. One of these ships was the USS *Constitution*, made from sturdy oak trees, which first launched in US waters in 1797.

By the time of *Constitution*'s maiden voyage in 1798, the US had peace treaties with most of the pirating states and the threat to merchant vessels abroad had lessened. But the ship remained armed and patrolled the seas for the enemy – which at that time was France. It took the occasional prize ship and recovered captured American vessels, but saw little real conflict. But when things again escalated in the Mediterranean, *Constitution* was recommissioned for active service. It was soon sent to negotiate vessel exchanges and peace in the Mediterranean, and spent four years away from the US.

When the frigate returned to Boston in 1807, tensions with Great Britain were already on the rise. In 1811, *Constitution* was in France at the height of the Napoleonic Wars and Britain closely monitored her movements. She safely returned home the following February, but the War of 1812 was only months away. By July, she was ocean-bound in pursuit of the enemy – this time, Great Britain.

The *Constitution* sailed out of Chesapeake Bay with Captain Isaac Hull commanding, heading north to join Commodore John Rodgers's squadron. It was fitted with 44 guns to give it an advantage over British vessels. It wasn't long before *Constitution* encountered a British fleet. The enemy gave chase that lasted 57 hours before the American ship could safely pull away. She returned to port only for necessary repairs before sailing right back to the Atlantic.

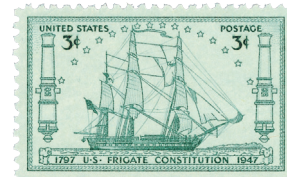
Hull avoided capture off the coast of New Jersey, sailed to Boston to replenish their supply of drinking water, and then headed northeast. On August 19, 1812, the British frigate *Guerriere* was spotted off the coast of Halifax,

Nova Scotia. The naval battle began when the two ships were just 25 yards apart. During the fighting, one sailor noted that the British cannonballs simply bounced off the *Constitution*'s oak hull, proclaiming it was "made of iron." This earned the ship its famous nickname – "Old Ironsides."

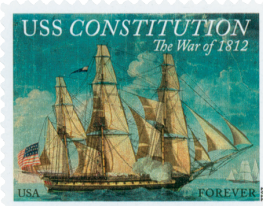
The two ships traded broadsides and collided three times before the *Guerriere*'s fore and main masts toppled overboard. Unable to maneuver, the ship's captain struck the *Guerriere*'s colors in surrender. Hull's men transferred the wounded British sailors and prisoners to the *Constitution* and set the enemy ship on fire, leaving it to sink.

The *Constitution*'s crew returned to Boston Harbor as heroes. They'd earned a rare victory at a time when the Americans were suffering devastating losses. This win at sea helped to inspire and encourage Americans, and prove to the rest of the world that America was a force to be reckoned with.

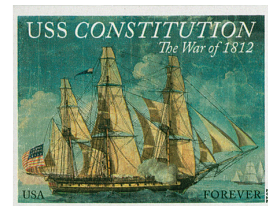
Condemned as unseaworthy in 1830, *Constitution* was brought to the public's attention by Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem, "Old Ironsides." The vessel was restored and placed back in service in 1833. Decommissioned in 1855, it was again rebuilt in 1877. In 1897, it was turned into a barrack ship in Boston. Then in 1931, the ship was again commissioned into active service, and it remains so to this day. The oldest warship afloat in the world, the *Constitution* is anchored in Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston.



Stamp pictures an architect's line drawing of the *Constitution*.



Stamp features an 1803 painting of the ship by Michele Felice Corné.



Imperforate Constitution Stamp

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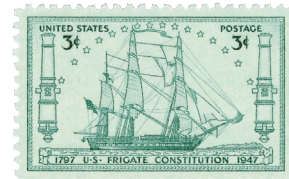
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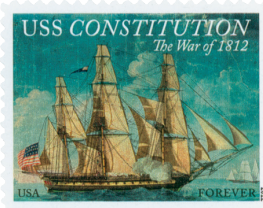
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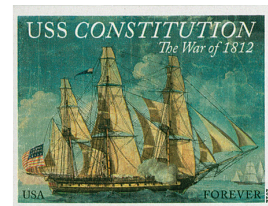
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