

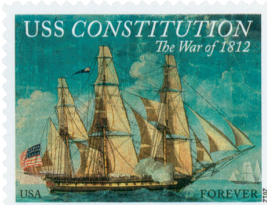
This Day in History... October 21, 1797

Launch of the USS *Constitution*

On October 21, 1797, the USS *Constitution* was launched into service in Boston Harbor. Today, more than two centuries later, it remains the world's oldest commissioned naval ship still afloat — a proud symbol of the early United States Navy and the nation's determination to protect its freedom and trade.

After the American Revolution ended in 1783, the new United States found itself without a navy. The Continental Navy, which had fought bravely during the war, was disbanded, and the few remaining warships were sold because the young nation lacked money to maintain them. Many Americans believed the country no longer needed a navy and should instead focus on rebuilding at home. That assumption quickly proved wrong.

By 1785, American merchant ships sailing through the Mediterranean Sea began to face a new threat — the Barbary Pirates. Operating from North African ports like Algiers and Tripoli, these pirates captured ships and demanded ransom for the crews. Before independence, American ships had been protected under British treaties, but now they were easy targets. When reports of captured ships reached the US, the government realized its vulnerability.



Issued for the 200th anniversary of the Constitution's War of 1812 battle with the Guerriere.

Thomas Jefferson, who was then serving as Minister to France, urged Congress to build a naval force to defend American commerce. John Jay, another influential statesman, also supported building warships — specifically, five 40-gun frigates. However, Congress hesitated. The new nation was still deep in debt from the Revolution, and many feared that maintaining a navy would be too expensive and might even provoke new wars.

Fortunately for a time, Portugal began blockading the Barbary fleets, unintentionally protecting American merchants. But that brief period of safety didn't last. By the early 1790s, US trade was once again under threat — this time not only from pirates but also from Britain and France. Each of those European powers was at war with the other and suspicious that American ships were helping their enemy. Both began seizing US merchant vessels at sea.

The situation worsened in 1793 when Portugal made peace with Algiers, ending its blockade. Almost immediately, Algerian corsairs resumed capturing American ships. By the end of that year, 11 American vessels had been taken and their crews imprisoned.

The United States could no longer rely on diplomacy or other nations for protection.

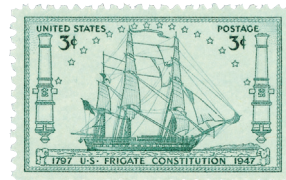
President George Washington realized it was time for action. On January 2, 1794, after a heated debate, the House of Representatives voted by a narrow margin — 46 to 44 — to establish a navy. Congress passed the Naval Act of 1794, and Washington signed it into law on March 27. The act called for the construction of six frigates: four with 40 guns and two with 36 guns. These ships would become the foundation of the modern US Navy.

Among them was the *Constitution*, a 44-gun frigate named personally by President Washington. Designed by Joshua Humphreys, she featured a longer, narrower hull and thicker wooden planking than most ships of the era. Her sturdy construction — a mix of pine and oak, with live oak from Georgia — gave her remarkable strength and speed. The keel was laid in Boston on November 1, 1794.

However, when the United States reached a peace agreement with Algiers in 1796, Congress debated whether to halt the costly shipbuilding program. They eventually decided to complete the three frigates closest to being finished: the *United States*, *Constellation*, and *Constitution*. The *Constitution* was first scheduled for launch on September 20, 1797, but during the ceremony, the ship stuck on the ways — the wooden ramps that guided it into the water. After rebuilding the ways, the ship was successfully launched on October 21, 1797, with President John Adams in attendance. Captain James Sever christened her by breaking a bottle of Madeira wine across her bow, marking the beginning of her long career.

The USS *Constitution* went on to serve with distinction. She protected American commerce during the Quasi-War with France, battled Barbary pirates in the Mediterranean, and gained everlasting fame during the War of 1812. In a famous battle against the British frigate *Guerriere*, cannonballs seemed to bounce off her tough oak hull, earning her the nickname "Old Ironsides."

Today, more than 225 years after her launch, the *Constitution* remains a commissioned US Navy ship, crewed by active-duty sailors and preserved as a floating museum in Boston Harbor. She stands as a living reminder of America's early struggles, its shipbuilding genius, and the enduring strength of the nation's Navy.



Stamp issued on the Constitution's 150th anniversary — this day in 1947.



The US Navy was founded three years earlier, in the same act that ordered the creation of the USS Constitution.



President George Washington chose the name Constitution to symbolize the principles the new Navy was built to defend.

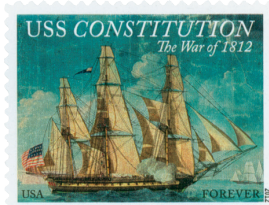
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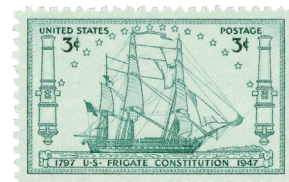


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