USS Constitution: America’s Ship of State
By Steve Tomisek (@tomiseksj)

On September 20, 1797, the newly built U. S. Frigate Constitution began the first of three attempts to launch from her building slip in Edmund Hartt’s shipyard into Boston Harbor. After moving just 27 feet, a fraction of her 150 foot keel, the ship came to an abrupt halt. The second attempt on September 22 saw another 31 feet of distance gained. In the weeks that followed, Edward Claghorn, the man who had overseen the Frigate’s construction over the previous three years, worked to get the ship afloat. On October 21, 1797, at high tide, Constitution floated into the harbour. Despite this rather inauspicious start, Constitution and her then-cutting edge technology marked the beginning of the United States’ ascent as a global sea power.

The Constitution was one of six frigates authorized by the U.S. Congress in 1794 in recognition of the need for a Navy to protect American commerce. Designed by Joshua Humphries and named by George Washington, Constitution has had a long and distinguished career. Her initial successes came during the Quasi-War with France (1798–1800) and the First Barbary War (1801–1805); however, she gained fame during the War of 1812, defeating five of the Royal Navy’s warships (HMS Guerriere, Java, Pictou, Levant and Cyane) and capturing many merchants. It was during her fight with Guerriere that she earned the nickname “Old Ironsides” as cannonballs seemingly bounced off her thick wooden hull.

Following a period of inactivity while undergoing extensive repairs, the Constitution served as flagship in both the Mediterranean and South Pacific squadrons during the 1820s and 1830s. She conducted an around-the-world cruise from 1844-1846 before returning to the Mediterranean. From 1852 to 1855 she conducted anti-slavery patrols while serving as the Africa Squadron’s flagship. During and after the Civil War Constitution served as a training ship. She was retired from active service in 1881, serving as a receiving ship until 1907 when she was designated a museum ship.

Some 20 years later, a nationwide effort was launched to raise the funds needed for a complete restoration of the ship, with numerous patriotic organizations and school children participating. Public financial support for the renovation totaled more than $1,000,000. The first mention of Constitution that I was able to find in the Postal Bulletin archive was linked to this fund raising effort. Specifically, the November 9, 1927 bulletin (No. 14534) advised that all postmasters at offices located in leased and rented spaces were permitted to display a picture of Constitution in their lobbies with accompanying information advising how and at what price the pictures being sold by the Constitution Campaign Committee could be obtained. Postmasters in offices located in Government-owned buildings required permission from the Treasury Department before being allowed to display the picture.

On July 1, 1931, after Constitution’s restoration had been completed, she began what would become a three-year National cruise, visiting ports along the Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific coasts of the United States. In conjunction with that event, effective August 1, 1931, a U.S. Frigate Constitution post office branch was established (postal Bulletin 15667). As she travelled from port to port on this cruise, thousands of covers would receive the U.S. Frigate Constitution postmark. Shown left is the cover that sparked my interest in writing this article; it was postmarked on March 31, 1933 during the Constitution’s call at San Francisco from March 22 to April 12 of that year. Included in the cover was the official program for that visit (shown on the right).
(Also shown are several other covers that I’ve subsequently acquired with Constitution postmarks from port calls in Washington, DC, and Bremerton and Anacortes, Washington.) At the conclusion of the cruise, Constitution’s Post Office branch was discontinued effective June 8, 1934 (PB 16497).

Constitution Postmarks from Other National Cruise Ports of Call

Since her return to Boston in 1934, she has primarily remained on exhibition there. Constitution celebrated her 150th Anniversary on October 21, 1947—it was on that occasion that she first was featured on a U.S. postage stamp. The central design of the 3 cent commemorative stamp was an architect’s line drawing of the Constitution, shown running before a light breeze with her commission pennant at the main. The guns shown as supporting features of the design were drawn from Navy Department records of the 24-pounders originally aboard the ship. The arch of 16 stars represented the number of States in the Union at the time of her launch in 1797. The stamp was printed by rotary press in blue green from plates of 200 subjects, electric-eye perforated 11x10½, and issued in panes of 50.

On January 6, 1965, a four cent, Old Ironsides stamped (embossed) envelope with bright blue indicia was placed on sale in Washington, DC. (Scott U549 shown left). The envelope was one of four produced under a new contract with the U.S. Envelope Company. On February 5, 1968 the envelopes were revalued to meet the six cent one ounce domestic letter rate (effective January 7, 1968) with the addition of a red two cent surcharge stamped to the left of the four cent indicia (Scott U552 shown left).
On May 3, 1985, the six cent, *Old Ironsides* nonprofit stamped (embossed) envelope with blue green indicia was placed on sale in Boston, Massachusetts (Scott U609); envelopes were available for sale elsewhere the following day. The six cent denomination met the basic rate for authorized nonprofit organization mailings that had become effective February 17, 1985.

**6c Nonprofit Organization Stamped Envelope (Scott U609)**

These envelopes were available in sizes 6⅛ and 10 in both regular and window format. On April 12, 1988, *Constitution* appeared on an 8.4 cent nonprofit stamped envelope released in Baltimore, Maryland. The pre-cancelled envelope was embossed and printed by typography in black and bright blue (Scott U612).

*Constitution*’s most recent appearance on a postal product was on a stamp issued in Boston on August 18, 2012 as first of four stamps in the USPS’ War of 1812 Bicentennial series. The design of the self-adhesive forever stamp (priced at 45 cents) features a painting of U.S.S. *Constitution* by Michele Felice Corné (circa 1803). The stamp was printed by photogravure in sheets of 100 in five panes of 20 and is serpentine die cut 10⅛ X 10⅜ (Scott 4703). Both die cut and imperforate sheets were available for sale.

**8.4c Nonprofit Organization Stamped Envelope (Scott U612)**

*Single, Pane and First Day Cover (Scott 4703) from the War of 1812 Bicentennial Series*

Today, the USS *Constitution* remains the oldest commissioned warship afloat and she is a source of national pride, having been designated “America’s Ship of State” by Act of Congress on October 28, 2009.

**Sources:**

- U.S. Postal Bulletins
- USS Constitution Museum
- Naval History and Heritage Command
- Scott Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps & Covers
- Extract of Bulletins #1-45, The Universal Ship Cancellation Society
- Public Law 111-84, Section 1022