



USS Constitution
Museum

Vessels Captured or Seized by *USS Constitution*

Carl Herzog, 2026

A publication of the USS Constitution Museum, Boston.

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CONTENTS

Thirty-three Vessels	3
Quasi-War with France	3
1798.....	3
1799.....	3
1800.....	4
The Barbary War.....	5
1804.....	5
1805.....	6
Trade Embargo and Restrictions.....	6
1810.....	6
War of 1812	6
1812.....	7
1814.....	8
1815.....	9
Africa Squadron	10
1853.....	10

Thirty-three Vessels

From 1798 to 1853, USS *Constitution* seized or captured 33 vessels. These occurred over the course of a variety of conflicts. Five of the ships were naval warships of Great Britain, and rest were either foreign privateers, enemy merchant ships, American merchant ships that had been taken by the enemy, or American merchants who were trading illegally.

Many of the captured vessels were destroyed at the time of capture while others were returned to U.S. ports. Each capture had to be adjudicated by a court to affirm its legality, then either sold or a prize value assigned. In a few cases, the court determined the captures were not legal, and the vessels were returned to their owners, and reparations made.

Quasi-War with France

USS *Constitution* was deployed first to the U.S. Atlantic coastline, then to the Caribbean to stop French privateers from seizing American merchant ships. Much of the duty involved recapturing American and British vessels that had been taken by the French, but confusion over ownership and muddled trade laws led *Constitution*'s first captain, Nicholson, to make critical mistakes in *Constitution*'s first two captures.

1798

September 8

***Niger* (24 guns)**

British privateer

The *Niger* was falsely seized by Nicholson, who believed it was a French ship. It had a French royalist captain who was unable to produce papers but said he had been working in the British service for five years. Though it was a primarily French crew, there were only 75 men. On board were a Philadelphia merchant's cargo, a Baltimore gentleman, and several Englishmen. Nicholson abandoned his station and returned with the prize to Hampton Roads, staying there for a month. The court ordered the ship returned to its owners and levied \$11,000 in compensation to the owners.

1799

January 16

Spencer

French prize; former British vessel

Spencer was a French prize that was falsely released by Nicholson. An English merchant vessel, *Spencer* had been captured as a prize by the French frigate *L'Insurgente*. Initially, Nicholson chose to seize the vessel and put aboard a prize crew, but he had second doubts about whether he was allowed to take a British vessel. Twelve hours after capturing *Spencer*, Nicholson pulled his crew and gave the vessel back to the French prize crew. Both American and British merchants were furious when they found out.

March 27 *Neutrality* **French prize; former American vessel**

Neutrality was an American sloop from New Haven that had been taken by the French. *Constitution* chased down and stopped the vessel with no shot fired. The French prize crew was removed, and an American officer and five seamen sailed it to Martinico.

April 3 *Carteret* **French prize; former British packet vessel**

Carteret was a British packet ship that had been taken by the French. It was stopped by *Constitution* with a single shot after a 32-hour chase. *Carteret* had carried away its main topmast during the chase but kept running. The 12-member French prize crew was removed, and 12 U.S. crew sailed *Carteret* into St. Pierre, Martinique.

September 15 *Amelia (Amalia)* **French prize; former Hamburg vessel**

Amelia was a Hamburg ship that had been captured by French 10 days earlier. A U.S. prize crew of 16 and a quartermaster were put on board and the ship was ordered to New York.

1800

February 1 *Swift* **Trafficker, American schooner**

Swift was an American schooner that had loaded cargo in the French port of Cap François on St. Domingue and was bound for Philadelphia. *Constitution* seized the ship for violating Congressional restrictions on trade with French colonies. A prize crew of two officers and eight men were put on board and the ship was sent to New York. The courts later returned the ship to its owners, having determined that, considering how the law was written, it was particularly difficult to prove intent to smuggle.

May 8	<i>Ester (3 guns)</i>	French privateer
May 8	<i>Nymph</i>	French prize; former American vessel
May 9	<i>Sally</i>	Trafficker, American vessel
May 10	<i>Sandwich (6 guns)</i>	French privateer

Over the course of four days, *Constitution*, in company with the U.S. Navy schooner *L'Amphitheatre*, captured four ships in and around the Spanish harbor of Puerto Plata on the north coast of Hispaniola. In dramatic fashion, the chases and attacks unfolded along the shoreline and in the harbor, each capture leading to the next. The French privateer *Ester* had

captured the American cargo vessel, *Nymph*, and was attempting to unload the prize's cargo to a barge along the beach. *Constitution* sailors and Marines, sent inshore in small boats from *L'Amphitheatre*, attacked the two ships and the barge. *Constitution*'s crew captured *Ester* and reclaimed *Nymph*, but in chasing the barge that was offloading cargo, *Constitution*'s small boat discovered and seized *Sally* for violating trade laws with French colonies. The next day, *Constitution* sailors used *Sally*, which had previously been in Puerto Plata, to sneak into the harbor and capture the French privateer, *Sandwich*. All four were eventually returned to New York. Although the region had been ceded to France in a treaty, Spain still controlled it, and the Spanish government protested *Sandwich*'s seizure from a neutral port. To avoid the diplomatic dispute, *Sandwich* was returned, but the court certified the others.

The Barbary War

In 1803, USS *Constitution* was deployed for the first time to the Mediterranean to confront the Barbary states that were seizing U.S. ships and imprisoning crews who refused to pay tribute for safe passage through the region. This conflict had been the original reason for the creation of a new standing Navy in 1794, but agreements to pay tribute had temporarily muted the hostilities. War broke out as those agreements broke down.

1804

September 11	(unknown)	Blockade runner, armed Ottoman poleacre
September 11	(unknown)	Blockade runner, armed Ottoman poleacre

On station enforcing a blockade of the port of Tripoli, *Constitution* captured two Greek cargo ships flying the Ottoman Empire's colors. Loaded with wheat, the ships were bound for Tripoli. The two crews, totaling 54 people, were removed and put ashore, and the ships were sent under prize crews to Malta.

1805

April 24	(unknown) (8 guns)	Privateer, Tunisian xebec
April 24	(unknown)	Tunisian prize; former Neapolitan vessel
April 24	(unknown)	Tunisian prize; former Neapolitan vessel

On station off Tripoli, *Constitution* stopped a Tunisian privateer in company with two cargo ships it had captured from the Kingdom of Naples. Though the United States was not at war with Tunis, and all three were flying the Tunisian flag, *Constitution*'s Captain John Rodgers determined the ships were being delivered to Tripoli. All three were seized and towed to Malta by USS *President*.

Trade Embargo and Restrictions

In 1807, amid the rising conflict between France and Britain, the United States declared an embargo and shut down trade with Europe altogether. The move was designed to pressure them into accepting U.S. neutrality. Over the next few years, the economically disastrous prohibition was revised in ways designed to ease the impact while still encouraging Britain and France to recognize American neutrality. In May 1809, *Constitution* became the flagship of a squadron patrolling the coast from the Chesapeake to Maine to enforce the regulations.

1810

May	<i>Golconda</i>	Trafficker, American vessel
May	<i>Rose</i>	Trafficker, American vessel

Off the entrance to New York harbor, *Constitution* seized two American cargo ships for violating the trade restrictions. *Golconda* was from New York, and *Rose* was from Philadelphia, but both were arriving at New York laden with British contraband cargo from Liverpool.

War of 1812

On June 18, 1812, the United States declared war against Great Britain. A complex variety of factors drove the hostilities, but British refusal to acknowledge American neutral trade, combined with the ongoing impressment of American seamen onto British warships, was central to the conflict. In a series of Atlantic cruises over the next three years, *Constitution* was tasked with capturing British merchant ships, confronting British naval ships, and protecting American commerce.

1812

August 10

Lady Warren

British brig

Patrolling the ocean off the entrance the Gulf of St. Lawrence, between Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, *Constitution* captured the British cargo ship, *Lady Warren*, which was sailing from St. John's, Newfoundland to Cape Breton with no cargo. The captain reported that he had been in the company of a British frigate and brig, but had become separated in the fog. After taking *Lady Warren*'s crew on board, *Constitution*'s crew set fire to the merchant ship.

August 11

Adiona

British brig

Patrolling the ocean off the entrance the Gulf of St. Lawrence, between Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, *Constitution* captured the British cargo ship *Adiona* from Sediack Harbor, New Brunswick. *Adiona* was bound for Newcastle, England with a cargo of pine timber. After taking the crew on board, *Adiona* was burned.

August 15

Adelina

British prize; former American vessel

August 15

(unknown)

British brig

At sunrise, *Constitution* sighted five ships and sailed toward them. The group proved to be a British sloop of war, an American privateer and three captured ships. The British naval ship fled as *Constitution* approached, but only after setting fire to one of the cargo ships, which was never identified. Another of the ships was *Adelina*, an American ship from Bath, Maine, that had been captured by the British. The other two were an American privateer and a ship it had earlier taken as a prize, but which had been retaken by the British sloop the day before. *Constitution* put a prize crew on *Adelina* with orders to sail it to the nearest American port.

August 19

HMS *Guerriere* (38 guns)

Royal Navy frigate

Sailing southeast of Halifax, Nova Scotia, *Constitution* encountered the British frigate HMS *Guerriere*. A pitched battle ensued in which *Constitution*'s larger size and heavier guns overwhelmed the British. *Guerriere* was completely dismasted when its captain surrendered. *Constitution* suffered seven crew killed and seven wounded; *Guerriere* had 15 dead and 63 wounded. The surviving British crew were all brought on board *Constitution*. *Guerriere*, too badly damaged to be returned to a U.S. port, was burned.

November 9

South Carolina

British-licensed American brig

Constitution stopped the American brig *South Carolina* in the mid-Atlantic. It was returning to Philadelphia from Lisbon after delivering a cargo of flour and corn and was carrying no return cargo. Although this was legal, the vessel also had a British license to operate, which was intended to protect it from seizure by the Royal Navy. To *Constitution*'s captain, William Bainbridge, a license to operate issued by the enemy made the vessel subject to capture. A prize crew was placed on board and the brig continued to Philadelphia. The court eventually determined that the existence of the license alone was not enough to condemn the vessel. It was returned to its owners.

December 29

HMS *Java* (38 guns)

Royal Navy frigate

Off the coast of Brazil, *Constitution* encountered HMS *Java*, bound for India and heavily laden with cargo and passengers. Over the course of a battle that involved extensive maneuvering, *Constitution*'s wheel was shot away and its rigging badly damaged, but *Java* fared much worse. It was completely dismasted and its captain killed by the time the senior lieutenant surrendered. *Constitution* had nine dead and 27 wounded, while *Java* suffered 22 dead and 102 wounded. Too badly damaged to be returned to a U.S. port, *Java* was burned.

1814

February 14

Lovely Ann

British armed merchant ship

February 14

HMS *Pictou* (14 guns)

Royal Navy schooner

Sailing east of Trinidad, *Constitution* spotted two ships. The first one stopped was *Lovely Ann*, a merchant ship armed with 10 small guns and carrying a cargo of lumber, fish, and flour from Bermuda to Surinam. After capturing the ship, *Constitution* pursued the second ship, the Royal Navy schooner HMS *Pictou*, which was escorting *Lovely Ann* and tried to escape. *Constitution* fired on *Pictou*, damaging the rigging and upper deck before it surrendered. Due to the damage, *Constitution*'s Captain Charles Stewart ordered the crews of both vessels placed on board *Lovely Ann* and ordered *Pictou* burned. With an American prize crew on board, *Lovely Ann* was sent to the British port of Barbados as "cartel," under a traditionally protected "flag of truce" status for returning prisoners of war. However, upon its arrival, the Barbados governor had the ship seized and the American prize crew imprisoned.

February 17 *Phoenix* **British schooner**

Off the island of Tobago, *Constitution* captured the British schooner *Phoenix*, carrying lumber and dispatches to Barbados from Georgetown in today's Guyana, a port that had been taken by the British from the Dutch in 1812. After removing the crew and passengers, the ship was burned.

February 19 *Catherine* **British brig**

Northwest of Grenada, *Constitution* captured the British brig *Catherine*, bound from Grenada to St. Thomas. The crew and passengers were taken on *Constitution*, and *Catherine* was burned.

December 24 *Lord Nelson* **British brig**

West of Bermuda, *Constitution* encountered *Lord Nelson*, a British cargo ship laden with provisions and bound for Bermuda from St. John's Newfoundland. The ship was flying a distress flag, having been damaged in a recent storm. *Constitution* removed the crew and took *Lord Nelson* under tow while its cargo of food was transferred to *Constitution*. When the cargo was completely removed, *Lord Nelson* was scuttled.

1815

February 18 *Susannah* **British vessel**

Off the coast of Portugal, *Constitution* stopped *Susannah*, a British ship bound to Liverpool from Buenos Aires carrying a cargo of animal hides, tallow, and two live jaguars. *Constitution* removed *Susannah*'s crew and the jaguars, which were chained to one of the ship's small boats on deck. A prize crew was put on *Susannah* to sail back to the United States.

February 20 **HMS *Cyane* (34 guns)** **Royal Navy frigate**
February 20 **HMS *Levant* (18 guns)** **Royal Navy corvette**

Off the coast of Madeira, *Constitution* encountered the two smaller British frigates, HMS *Cyane* and HMS *Levant*, and engaged them both at once. In a slow-moving battle under light winds, the two British ships eventually separated, and *Constitution* managed to defeat and capture first *Cyane*, and then *Levant*. Four *Constitution* crew members were killed and 14 wounded. Estimates of British losses were 12 dead and 26 wounded on *Cyane*, and 23 dead and 16 wounded on *Levant*. Prize crews were put on both ships with the intent of all three to return to the United States, but the slower moving *Levant* was recaptured by the British two weeks later.

Africa Squadron

From 1853 to 1855, USS *Constitution* was deployed to the coast of west Africa as part of a squadron intended to prevent international slave trade. Although ownership of enslaved people was still legal in the United States, an international treaty had outlawed the further importation of people into slavery. Despite this, enslavers were known to send ships from Africa to Cuba and then into New Orleans, where Africans were being illegally sold into slavery in the United States.

1853

November 3

H.N. Gambrill

American slave vessel

South of the Congo River delta, *Constitution* stopped the New York schooner *H.N. Gambrill*. Although it had no enslaved people on board, the ship's outfitting suggested it was en route to take on a cargo of people. After questioning *H.N. Gambrill*'s crew, *Constitution*'s officers determined the ship was, in fact, a slaver, and they seized it. A prize crew was put on board and the ship was returned to New York.