



USS Constitution
Museum

TRANSCRIPTION OF

**Letter from
Isaac Hull to Paul Hamilton,
July 21, 1812**

USS Constitution Museum Collection [1296.2]

United States Frigate Constitution at Sea July 21, 1812

In pursuance of your orders of the 3^d instant I left Annapolis on the 5th instant and the capes on the 12th of which I advised you by pilot. For several days after we got out the wind was light and ahead. On the 17th at two PM being in 22 fathoms water off Egg Harbor, four sail of ships were discovered from our masthead northward & in shore of us, apparently ships of war. The wind being very light all sail was made in chase of them to ascertain whether they were the enemy's ships of our squadron having got out of N. York awaiting the arrival of the Constitution, the latter of which I had reason to believe was the case. At four in the afternoon, a ship was seen from the masthead, bearing about N.E. standing for us under all sail, which she continued to do until sundown, at which time she was too far off to distinguish signals and the ships in shore only to be seen from the tops. At ten in the evening, being within six or eight miles of the strange sail, the private signal was made, and kept up nearly one hour, but finding she could not answer it, I concluded she and the ships in shore were enemy. I immediately hauled off to the southward and eastward, and made all sail, having determined to lay off until daylight to see what they were. The ship that we had been chasing sailed off after us showing a light, and occasionally making signals supposed to be for the ships in shore. On the 18th before daylight saw two sail under our lee, which proved to be enemy's frigates. One frigate astern within about five or six miles, and a line of battle ship, a frigate a brig and a schooner, about ten or twelve miles directly astern, all in chase of us with a fine breeze, and coming up fast, it being nearly calm where we were. Soon after sunrise the wind entirely left us and the ship would not steer, but fell round off with her head towards the two ships under our lee. The boats were instantly hoisted out, and sent ahead to tow the ship's head round, and to endeavour to get her farther from the enemy, being there within five miles of three heavy frigates. The boats of the enemy were got out and sent ahead to tow by which, with the light air that remained with them, they came up very fast. Finding the enemy gaining on us, and but little chance of escaping from them, I ordered two of the guns on the gundeck to be run out at the cabin windows for stern guns on the gundeck, and hoisted one of the 24 pounders off the gundeck and run that, with the forecastle gun, an 18 pounder, out at the ports on the quarterdeck, and cleared ship for action. At about seven, in the morning, the ship nearest us approaching within gunshot, and directly astern, I ordered one of the stern guns fired, to see if we could reach her, to endeavor to disable her masts; found the shot fell a little short, would not fire any more. At eight four of the enemy's ships nearly within gunshot, some of them having six or eight boats ahead towing, with all and their oars and sweeps out, to row them up with us, which they were fast doing. It now appeared that we must be taken, and that our escape was impossible—four heavy ships nearly within gunshot, and coming up fast, and not the least hope of a breeze to give us a chance of getting off by outsailing them. In this situation finding ourselves in only 24 fathoms of water, by the suggestion of that valuable officer Lieut Morris, I determined to try and warp the ship ahead, by carrying out anchors and warping her up to them; three or four hundred fathoms of rope was instantly got up, and two anchors got ready and sent ahead by which means we began to gain ahead of the enemy, they, however, soon saw our boats carrying out the anchors, and adopted the same plan, under very advantageous circumstances, as all the boats from the ships furthest off were sent to tow and warp up those nearest to us, by which means they again came up, so that at nine the ship nearest us began to fire her bow guns, which we instantly returned by our guns in the cabin and on the quarterdeck. All the shot from the enemy fell short; but we have reason to believe that some of ours went on board her, as we could not see them strike the water. Soon after nine a second frigate passed under our lee and opened her broadside, but finding her shot fell short, discontinued her fire, but continued as did all the rest of them to make all possible exertion to get up with us. From nine to twelve, all hands were employed in warping in warping [sic] the ship ahead. About two in the afternoon, all the boats from the line of battle ship and some of the frigates were sent to the frigate nearest to us, to endeavor to tow her up, but a light breeze sprung up, which enabled us hold way with her notwithstanding had eight or ten boats ahead and all her sails furled to tow her to windward. On the 19th at daylight passed within gunshot of one of the frigates but she did not fire on us, soon after passing us she tacked and stood after us – at this time six sail were in sight under all sail after us. At nine in the morning saw a strange sail on our weather beam, supposed to be an American merchant ship, the instant the frigate nearest us saw her, she hoisted American colours, as did all the squadron in hopes to decoy her down, I immediately hoisted The English colours that she might not be deceived, she soon hauled her wind and it is to be hoped made her escape. All this day the wind increased gradually, and we gained on the enemy in the course of the day, six or eight miles; they, however, continued chasing us all night under a press of sail. On the 20th at daylight in the morning, only three of them could be seen from the masthead the nearest of which was about twelve miles off, directly astern. All hands were set at work wetting the sails, from the royals down, and we soon found, that we left the enemy very fast. At a quarter past eight, the enemy finding that they were fast dropping astern, gave over chase, and hauled their wind to the northward probably for the station off New York. I cannot in justice to the brave officers and crew under my command, close without expressing to you the confidence I have in them, and assuring you that their conduct while under the guns of the enemy, was such as might have been expected from American officers and seamen. I have the honor to be with great respect &c &c.

The Hon. Paul Hamilton – Secretary of the Navy, Washington

Isaac Hull